

To be read one chapter at a time,
each night, before bed.

Vignette - The Happy Little Bird



NCE UPON A VERY, very long time ago indeed, in a place not too far away from here at all, lived the happiest of the happy little birds.

Seven little hatchlings sang their song in her nest, and filled the little bird's heart with such joy as most have, or will never know. She had brought life into this world seven times over, and her purpose was thus quite adequately fulfilled.

Existence held meaning for the little bird; she knew her place -- this is a rare indulgence for man, but not for the creatures of nature, who go about their business with a blissful ignorance, driven only to fulfil what is given to them to do, and nothing more.

Sadly, the little bird was to lose that most heavenly of comforts in the most foulest of foul ways.

She had been out collecting grubs and insects with which to feed her young, as the little bird had done for the several days since the offspring had been borne out of their eggs, and into the warm spring air, when, upon her return, she witnessed a sight so terrible that, thankfully, few could empathize with.

Her nest had fallen a hundred meters to the ground, and all of her chicks had died.

Bewildered, she could initially do nothing but sit there, beside the remnants of her destroyed life; unable to truly comprehend the magnitude of her tragedy, the little bird could not even mourn, for to do so would require an acknowledgement of her loss. Eventually, she resumed her normal habits, as normal as they could be under the circumstances -- she foraged for grubs and insects, returning with them, and presenting them to the decaying muddle that was once her home, her nest.

Weeks, and then months passed.

A seedling sprouted from somewhere within the wreckage, and it grew, nourished by the dead hatchlings. Before long, it became prominent over that which had gestated it, and the little bird felt great love for the seedling, the tiny tree that had risen from the chaos that she still failed to understand. In the little bird's mind, the plant had replaced her chicks as her offspring, and she would not endure such loss again.

So, she continued foraging for insects and grubs, presenting them at the base of the tiny tree. The tree grew to be a half-meter tall -- insignificant to you or I, but of grand stature in comparison to the little bird -- and it sprouted seven fruit, one for each of the hatchlings who had died in order to give it birth.

All the meanwhile, a drought was slowly descending upon the land, but the little bird and her tiny tree flourished.

To the other forest creatures, this fact did not remain unnoticed for very long.

"Let us have the fruit," pleaded the other birds, "for we are starving."

"These are my children," retorted the bird, perplexed that her kind would wish to be so vile. "How could you even consider such a fetid proposition?"

"They are not birds; they are fruit!" they cried. "Can you not see this? Have you lost your mind?"

The little bird was adamant. "You see what you wish to see, and I will see what I wish to see -- and I see my children, cradled safely by this tiny tree, who has resurrected them from the ground."

Inevitably, the other birds would mount an assault upon the little mother, and her tiny offspring; she would repel them with such ferocity only those with children hold within, and the attackers would be forced to retreat. Soon, they would move on, in search of food elsewhere, and the bird would be left alone.

She was starving.

Her strength of will, and her conviction, could only invigorate the little bird for so long. Eventually, she was faced with the reality that if she stayed there any longer, she would be

incapable of tending to the tiny tree, and her offspring, and they would all perish.

Finding this notion unacceptable, she uprooted the tiny tree with the might that comes with true dedication, and held it in her claws gently while she flew as best she could away from the drought -- except that it was everywhere, and seemed never-ending.

The hunger that burned deep within the little bird rose to the surface, threatening to consume her, and bring her to death, but there was no food; the only nutrition available was her precious offspring, and she could not bear to think such terrible thoughts. She flew on, sapping every last ounce of her remaining perseverance until she could travel no farther.

If she did not eat, then, she would die.

With horrible regret, she made a decision that, if you are fortunate, you should never need to make. The little bird ate one of the hatchlings, one of the fruit -- one of her children.

She mourned and cried at her loss, and then carried on, flying away from where she came in search of a place that was not parched, where she could replant the tiny tree that cradled her remaining offspring, and they would all grow once more, together.

That wonderful place would not be found before the little bird starved once more, and was again faced with the grim spectre of death; that terrible choice was deliberated upon for a second time, and for a second time she surrendered one of her precious children to save the rest.

No less did she mourn and cry at this sacrifice, before carrying on once more; the burden in her claw lessened the smallest bit, but the burden in her heart increased beyond measure. The burnt land did not change; no life existed upon its surface, and the little bird flew for days and days without finding the solace that she so desperately sought.

A third fruit, a third child was given to the cause, and then a fourth. Only three remained, and she vowed that no more would perish -- this was a promise she could not keep, for the land was still dry, parched and burnt by the inexplicable anger of the Sun, and nothing could inhabit it.

She carried on.

Dear reader, do not lose hope, for this will not end the way you expect; although hope and happy endings are no longer fashionable in modern fiction, there should always be balance -- otherwise, there would be no point in this writing. Bear with me.

Regretfully, there were soon only two fruit hanging from the tiny tree, and then one. The little bird flew on, in the same direction, away from her home, where her nest had fallen from the tree, and her hatchlings had been killed, and the little sapling had sprouted, and borne the fruit that was her children.

She would expire soon; there would be no point in consuming her last child, for it was all the little bird had in the world, and with it gone, she would have nothing left to live for. She stopped her flight, and landed on the parched earth, and scratched out a place for the tiny tree, replanting it into the dry soil.

Then, she cried.

The little bird cried, and cried, and cried, wailing with the grief that only one who had lost seven children not once, but twice, could ever know. It had been all for naught, all that suffering, all of that sacrifice; she knew then that the world was a cruel, terrifying place, one where all those who were assigned to inhabit it were truly damned.

Her tears began to pool about the tiny tree, and soon formed a small pond; the little bird continued to cry, and impossibly, water ceaselessly poured from her eyes for hours, and days -- until she died.

Falling into the moat that surrounded the tiny tree, her corpse would sink into the water and slowly rot, providing the nourishment necessary for the tiny tree to survive, and sustain the last remaining child of the little bird through the end of the drought, and, like her tears, rain would fall across the land once again.

Her child would be released from the tiny tree, and roll away, to sprout, take root, and become a not-so-tiny tree of its own. It would bear seven fruit, and each would fall, roll away, sprout and become a much larger tree -- this cycle would continue until a mighty forest emerged from the dust of the drought that had killed so many, and fostered such sacrifice and loss.

The following tale shares many similarities to what you have just read, except it involves a young woman named Adelaide Pemberton, and a guinea pig, named Gig.

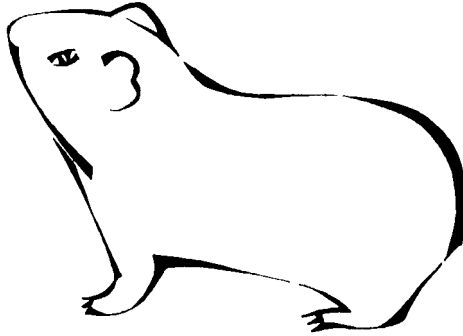


MELODY AYRES-GRIFFITHS PRESENTS:

ADELAIDE'S PINNYGIG

A SLUMBER-TIME ADVENTURE.

ARTWORK GRACIOUSLY PROVIDED BY APRIL AYRES-GRIFFITHS.



Published in 2009 by YouWriteOn.com

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Second Edition

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Dedicated to the Ayres', and the Griffiths'.

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FOREWORD:

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION.

MANY NOTEWORTHY EFFORTS, both scholarly and otherwise, have been made in modern times to chronicle the events that took place at the dawn of the Twenty-First century, before the Fall and the subsequent New Enlightenment, but none have focussed so completely on the human element as what we, the Publishers, proudly present to you here.

The recent discovery of Adelaide Pemberton's journal has provided us with some unique glimpses into that banished Age of over five-hundred years past; however, those writings are woefully incomplete, and educated speculation is required to draw a coherent picture of those most-important events as experienced and witnessed by the one deemed most critical to the foundation of our present society.

Therefore, we have commissioned esteemed psycho-historian Doctor Judith Burnley to construct for us a credible interpretation of the thoughts and convictions held by one of the most mythic figures from human history; this has been an undertaking that, we are well assured, was not taken lightly.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we proudly give to you: "Adelaide's Pinnygig".

The Publishers,

April 4th, 2518.

PROLOGUE:

THE CLIFF.

SNOW ENCRUSTED HIS BEARD, his moustache; even his eyebrows were heavy with the ice formed by the repeated melting and refreezing of water warmed by his skin, and then touched by the icy breath of the frigid winds swirling about him.

This was no place for an old Australian, marooned on the face of a perfectly vertical cliff perhaps five hundred meters in any given direction, with visibility of less than a quarter of that, the remainder shrouded in a fog of fine, powdery snow. It was surreal; he felt that if he fell, he would fall forever, in nothingness. To continue the climb almost seemed pointless, for there appeared to be no destination, only an endless journey to nowhere.

It was a moot debate; he had lost his equipment and presently dangled from his last anchor, that saviour earlier preventing his plummet on to the rocks far below. His precious charge huddled deep inside his guardian's thick parka, unaware of their current state of desperation, but suspicious that things were not at all well. Ruminations on the subject were muttered, quietly.

Designed to avoid encountering a lethal avalanche, a decision was earlier made to instead scale the cliff; in retrospect, perhaps the less-desired alternative might have been one better chosen. However, hindsight was, in this case, about one half of one kilometre beneath, far from reach and well withdrawn from consideration. A long-abandoned logging camp, the night previous, or perhaps the one before that, it was difficult to determine for just how long they had been stranded, had provided a warm backdrop to that consideration.

The rudimentary comforts that it had provided were remembered fondly.

Raising his hands in a Wagnerian crescendo, an unseen conductor prompted the orchestra of wind to sharply exclaim its fury towards the hapless human and his tiny companion; they swung violently, struck against the rock repeatedly, thoroughly

tenderised for easy consumption by whatever animal might discover their lifeless corpses later, far below.

There was a sound. The bell-like peals of metal striking granite drifted up from the emptiness, a chorus of hope that instantly rekindled the fire deep within the man's heart. Previously thought to be merely dangling, useless and inconsequential, the few meters of rope that trailed beneath him was eagerly, but carefully collected and, miraculously, an axe clung to it -- tenuously.

Once again, they could carry on.

Of course, there were much safer, preferable methods to make such a journey. A train, or perhaps a motorcar would have provided transportation for much less effort, and at reduced personal risk. Sadly, these were likely to be scrutinized by those elements that strongly desired to see the demise of both the mountaineer and his cargo.

They had taken flight weeks before, from the coast and the sea; betrayed by one of his own, the man's colleagues were dead and he wasted little time pondering an appropriate course of action. That spontaneity certainly saved both his life and that of his charge, a research subject of whom the man had a great fondness; he had illicitly removed it from the laboratory to his private residence a day earlier.

Hostile elements were everywhere. A discovery had been made that could change the world for the better, but the financial statements of a few for the worse, and the creature in his possession was a living 'proof-of-concept'; it undeniably demonstrated a principle that a particular collective of great influence wished for none to observe. To ensure this, they had apparently engaged the services of one or more individuals devoid of decency, for his associates had been quite gruesomely, and callously dispatched; had he not been unexpectedly called away, he too would have shared their fate.

There were no authorities that could aid him, and no court to which he could appeal his arbitrary death sentence. All levels of government were corrupted, tainted by bribery and coercion sponsored by those forces intent upon his destruction. He must disappear, vanish without a trace, and only a cross-country journey, on foot and away from human settlement, would accomplish this.

Hence, the cliff.

Axe solidly in hand, the climb continued, but slowly, hindered by his minimalist equipment. His pint-sized companion sensed their progress, and took to a state of slumber, soothed by the repetitive motions of a ponderous, but steady ascent. Soon, they would conquer that cliff; however, many more such obstacles lay in wait for the two adventurers, the scientist and his subject, before they would reach their destination, a place of safety and security -- at least, for some time to come.

Snow encrusted his moustache, and fouled his beard; his eyebrows were heavy with the ice formed by the melting and repeated refreezing of water warmed by his skin, and then frosted by the frigid breath of the icy winds swirling around him.

This was definitely no place for an old Australian.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE:

MEET ADELAIDE PEMBERTON.

EAGLE LOOKED DOWN FROM HIS PERCH, high up in the dense treetop canopy, to witness Bear forage for berries on bushes rooted in the dense carpeting of mulch and moss that lay upon the forest floor far below.

Mist hung about the old brown Bear, shrouding him from other inhabitants of the ground to whose misfortune an accidental encounter might result from his unintended concealment. Eagle observed that this was to occur, presently, when Cougar, on the hunt for small prey, would come a tad too close to Bear for either of their liking.

Bear expressed his displeasure promptly and, having quite obviously woken up on the wrong side of his cave, angrily challenged Cougar to battle; his opponent was himself quite stubborn, and answered that call wholeheartedly. It would not do; Eagle could not merely sit there and watch those two injure themselves, perhaps mortally, over such a trivial matter when there were much greater concerns.

The bird swooped down to a lower branch, and loudly screeched his objection.

“Now Bear,” he called to the brown behemoth below, “have some decorum.”

“Tell that animal,” growled Bear, referring to Cougar, “to mind his distance.”

“It’s a free forest,” protested Cougar sharply. “You need to mind your manners. We all need to eat, you know. You don’t ‘own the joint’.”

Bear moved to disagree.

“Perhaps now is not the best time to engage upon a discussion regarding forest politics,” interjected Eagle, hoping to stave off a resumption of hostilities. “It might be more productive

to discuss the not-small matter of the humans currently chewing into our home from the east."

"Humans," grunted Bear. "I have a fine solution for you."

"Unfortunately, Bear, your solutions tend to be unsustainable in the long term. No," Eagle continued, "I think we need a more careful approach."

"Throw pinecones at them!" shouted a chorus of eavesdropping squirrels.

"Amusing, certainly, but decidedly ineffective. I'm quite confident that convincing them to leave will require greater incentive."

"This is where I come in," murmured Cougar, evilly.

Eagle sighed. "That would seem to be the case; as unpalatable a notion that might be, the services of you and your colleagues may inevitably be required. I would recommend some less hostile action first, however."

"Such as?" laughed Bear, "a deer blockade?"

"Splendid notion!" Eagle commended the slightly confused Bear for his snide suggestion. "In all seriousness, that might just work."

"Well, when it doesn't," said the less-than-enthusiastic Cougar, "you know where to find me."

"Indeed," concluded Eagle, adjourning their impromptu meeting with his departure, to seek out the deer and advance their proposition. With luck, the invading menace might be halted by their peaceful intervention; it would be best for all concerned if no blood was lost in this conflict.

Eagle hoped that the Spirits of the forest would aid them in their struggle. He called for them.

"I trust that's Mathematics you're busily scribbling away at," the Spirits answered, confusing Eagle.

"Mathematics?" Eagle replied, uncertain as to what the Spirits referred.

“Yes, Mathematics, Adelaide.”

Adelaide Pemberton looked up from her ruled paper, and the text pencilled upon it to meet the eyes of her instructor, one not terribly amused by her pupil's obvious lack of concern for the subject that she was endeavouring to instruct.

“Writers don't make money, Adelaide. Mathematics makes money.” Missus Auburn tut-tutted her student. “You don't want to be poor your whole life, do you?”

“Missus Auburn, with all due respect,” responded Adelaide, candidly, “it's not as if you drive a Porsche.” -- a reference to a luxury motorcar of the period.

Laughter erupted in the classroom, prompted by Adelaide's flippant remark, and resulted in her immediate direction to the Vice-Principal's office for summary discipline. This was not a situation of which the fifteen year-old Adelaide was unfamiliar. Her defiant green eyes, framed by her vibrant red hair stared back at her superior, accented by a sprinkling of recalcitrant, random freckles, each of which displayed their own bold individuality.

Several minutes were passed in silence. “What, pray tell,” eventuated some speech from the Vice-Principal's stubble-bordered mouth, “shall we ever do with you?”

It was a rhetorical question, but Adelaide answered the man anyhow.

“You could graduate me, and then I wouldn't be a bother anymore,” she suggested, more ‘tongue-in-cheek’ than with any serious intent. “It is only two more years, after all. You let the remedial students go after grade ten, why not me?”

“Because they're only meant to be fry-cooks and janitors.”

“But I could be a fry-cook!”

“And you will, if you keep up with these antics.”

“She really doesn't own a Porsche.” Adelaide slouched, crossed her arms and grumbled. Something moved in her jacket, and she abruptly straightened up in an attempt to conceal that clandestine activity.

"I'll be good," she stammered, whilst stretching and feigning fatigue, "I promise."

"Fine. You can go --"

Adelaide leapt up, and made haste in her departure, ignoring the voice that followed her indicating an imminent further discussion regarding the occupant of her coat. The bell rang, signalling the conclusion of another school day, and she was quickly joined in the hallway by the writhing, stinking mass of the collective student body. Wading through the sea of adolescent humanity, Adelaide reached her locker, opened it and stowed her schoolwork in exchange for her backpack.

The occupant of her jacket became exceedingly restless.

"Knock it off," she mumbled down through the neck of her coat to her agitated companion. "Give me a minute. Cheezus McCrisp" -- a thinly veiled reference to the Christian saviour.

Jeremy, her suave, athletic next-door neighbour, nodded toward her from across the hallway. They were childhood friends -- perhaps more -- but he had his 'image', and at the school they did not associate directly. Her view of him promptly became blocked by the cosmetic-laden visage of her present 'best-friend', an inky-black haired, brown-eyed, synthetic-rubber 'gum' chewing, heavily pierced and mildly tattooed individual known as Tanya Weatherington.

"Hey Tanya," called a boy from down the hall, appending his salutation with a vulgar proposition.

"In your dreams," shouted Tanya, gesturing at him with her hand in an expression of extreme disrespect. She then redirected her attention to Adelaide. "So, what're you doing tonight?"

"Homework, probably," Adelaide sighed in false discontent. Truthfully, she would likely 'sneak over' to Jeremy's house well after dark, and they would talk until the small hours; then Adelaide would creep home again, her absence undetected by her father.

Or so she would hope.

"Bummer." Tanya extended her condolences. "Well, I got a hot date. Some greaser from the garage. Should be fun," she laughed.

“Aren’t you, like, fourteen?”

“He doesn’t know that. He thinks I’m seventeen.” Tanya glared with annoyance. “And you had better not say any different.”

“Okay, okay, whatever.” Adelaide shook her head in an expression of mild exasperation toward her friend’s untoward activities. “You’re going to get a disease; you know this, don’t you?”

Tanya ignored her unwanted advice, and abruptly changed the subject. “How’s piggy? Where’s piggy?”

“Not here,” Adelaide growled softly, “Outside.”

“Aww,” her friend mockingly expressed her disappointment. “It’s not like the whole school doesn’t know about piggy; however, there is another theory circulating that you have a demon-possessed breast, but that one’s not very credible.”

‘Piggy’, anxious for consideration, became intolerably energetic, scrambling about inside Adelaide’s jacket as if infested with fleas. His guardian quickly retrieved her uncooperative pet, and moved closer to Tanya, so that his presence might remain concealed.

Tanya proved to once again be completely unhelpful, and instead squealed in delight. “Piggy!” she shouted in unbridled exuberance, announcing his existence to the world.

Gig, the guinea pig, a calico of white, black and brown with an adorable pink nose, was subsequently mauled with her affections. Not that he minded, of course. Quite frankly, he was, and apologies for the obvious pun, a bit of a ‘ham’, to use a contextual colloquialism. Adelaide’s journal contains several entries detailing his social tendencies; consider the following example:

“Tonight, I attended Christina’s birthday party. She’s a girl from my English class; I don’t know her very well, but I’m not one to decline free cake. Anyhow, Gig apparently decided to tag along in my purse, for when I returned to the sofa where I had left it, three girls were sitting there, making much to-do over my furry friend.

Shy he is most certainly not.”

Gig purred happily, such that a guinea pig does, while Adelaide humoured both him and Tanya to the furthest extent of her patience. This was not for too long.

“All right, you two, time to go.” Tanya gave a heart-wrenching, dramatic farewell to Gig; then, inside the jacket once again, he and Adelaide departed, out into the cold autumn air and the town that was Suffield, Saskatchewan, on the Canadian Prairies.

Rumsfeld, the bulldog-boxer crossbreed so named for his striking resemblance to a particular American official, awaited them at the schoolyard gate, to accompany the pair home. Seven, or eight, Adelaide herself seems uncertain in her writings as to his true age; he was a wise, experienced dog who took great pride in his duty to protect his family. No one would dare harass Adelaide when Rumsfeld was present, although the danger present in that small town was quite minimal.

A farming village of perhaps one thousand people, the grain elevator stationed next to the railway was the tallest structure by far; nothing else stood higher than two stories. There was a single ‘Main Street’ of businesses; one primary education facility and one secondary, which Adelaide presently attended, were also installed there. A ‘town hall’ and an outdoor arena were the only other structures of note.

Other than those minor disturbances, the horizon was completely flat.

Adelaide lived at the edge of the settlement, approximately a fifteen-minute walk from the school; that was her present destination.

Tanya waved as she passed, seated on the rear of a two-wheeled contraption known as a ‘motorcycle’, presumably driven by her much-older ‘date’ from the garage. The noise generated by the mechanical beast caused Gig to shiver inside the jacket, and Rumsfeld growled in response to its unearthly provocation.

Pausing to wave in response, Adelaide emitted a deep sigh. She was genuinely concerned for Tanya; there was much to be anxious about. Her mother, an abusive alcoholic, cared little what Tanya did, and she had no father; that is, he had left when she was a young child. Denied positive nurturing and left to her own devices,

Tanya was eager for whatever attention she could obtain -- even, and usually, negative.

Sadly, Tanya's evening was almost certain to end in either promiscuity or violence: likely, it would entail some combination of both.

The motorcycle's racket trailing into the distance, Adelaide's companions relaxed, and their journey continued. Gig scrambled up to the neck of the jacket, so that he might poke his head from it to see his best friend, the dog Rumsfeld, walking aside and beneath him. His hero, the guinea pig aspired to one day be as bold, gruff -- and large.

For you see, Gig, not knowing any better, thought that, like Rumsfeld, he was a dog.

'Wheeking', the siren-like sound that guinea pigs use to express themselves, was a pursuit that Gig subsequently engaged in, although with only enough volume to attract the notice of his 'fellow canine', who turned his head over and up to acknowledge his much smaller compatriot. Pleased, Gig retreated inside the coat once again.

Adelaide hypothesizes in her journals regarding this strange dynamic; unable to stay by her side whilst she attended school, her theory involved the odd notion that Rumsfeld intentionally persuaded Gig he was a much more aggressive animal in order that he might protect her when the bulldog could not. While any aid that the guinea pig could provide would be quite minimal, Rumsfeld would staunchly insist that Adelaide carry her tiny defender to class every day, apparently for his own deluded peace of mind.

This was not a request the young woman resisted, for Gig was far better company than her fellow pupils, miscreants and reprobates all -- with the exclusion of Tanya and Jeremy, of course.

A brief detour was considered, and then decided. Perhaps borne of the frustration felt towards her friend Tanya's ill-conceived activities, Adelaide was urged to 'drown her sorrows' with the toxic combination of carbonated water, sweetened with copious quantities of refined sugar, and 'potato chips', the vegetable sliced thinly, and then fried in oil creating a deadly combination of carbohydrates and fat.

It would not be far; a visit to the town's business district would add only a few minutes to her journey. She diverted, and soon arrived at 'Main Street', Suffield Avenue, the angled parking slots for automobiles covered with leaves of red and yellow, having fallen off the deciduous trees, planted at the edge of the roadway, to the ground, below.

Here resided a two-aisle grocery, a diner, a small pharmacy and a hardware store, among others, all engaged in a thriving business with the inhabitants of not only the town, but also the surrounds for dozens of kilometres. The Feed and Supply building, however, was curiously silent, the gate locked, blinds all drawn.

"I wouldn't know," answered the grocer, Missus Greensborough, in reply to Adelaide's consequent query whilst her dietary frivolity was acquired. "I do hope that Mick," referring to the Feed and Supply's proprietor, Mister Hervey, "is all right."

Adelaide nodded sympathetically. Gig had his glorious origins in that establishment; as such, the girl felt a certain attachment to both it and the old Australian who managed it. Enquiries made at the hardware store, at the pharmacy and wherever else yielded no further information; stymied, Adelaide resumed her journey home.

"Dearest -- deer," stammered Eagle, flustered by his own unintended pun, "we require your aid."

"With supper?" retorted Deer, the dearest of the deer, with a certain measure of contempt. "I am afraid we shall have to decline, for you see, we are not merely unfeeling cattle waiting for harvest, but," he paused proudly, "noble creatures, perhaps the noblest of all."

"Yes, yes," said Eagle, impatiently, dismissively, "we know all of that. No, we require your aid against the humans. Is it true they can no longer hunt you?"

"It would seem so," confirmed Deer with great satisfaction. "Another force must be preventing them from doing so, one favourable to the Deer. Why do you question me so?"

"The thought was recently raised that perhaps, using your apparent newfound security, your kind might be successful in

passively persuading the humans presently destroying the forest to the east to cease their activities, and withdraw.”

Deer mulled this over for a moment. “Of course, I will need to discuss this with my fellows; however, I can see no reason against exploring the particulars of your suggestion. Come back later, and we will answer.”

Eagle nodded, and then flew off, to survey the current status of the humans’ unwelcome accomplishments.

They had been quite industrious.

With great alarm, the bird observed that the invaders had felled not less than one hundred trees since that same time the day before. Great mechanical beasts assisted them in their efforts, providing a fierce army for which the trees had no defence. It would not be long before those creatures displaced would encroach upon land occupied by others, and civil war would ensue amongst the forest creatures; this outcome would simply be unacceptable.

Through whatever means necessary, even Cougar and his band, it must be stopped.

The story paused here; Adelaide, recognizing the dimensions and assorted decoration of the weatherboard structure that served as her residence, returned to reality, leaving the conundrum of the forest dwellers for the time being. The house was red, with brown trim and yellow around the base; she and her father had painted it several years before, colours chosen by the young girl with the aesthetic notions of a ‘hot dog’, a dish consisting of bread, wrapped around a long, thin, cylindrical machine-formed amalgamation of meats from random origins, garnished with sugar-sweetened tomato paste and a concoction of mustard seed and vinegar.

A gourmet Adelaide’s father was not, and many of these were consumed throughout her childhood, after her mother had vanished from her life. Prior to this, they had disagreed quite often, Adelaide’s parents, raised voices subsequently hushed so as not to wake the sleeping child, but such efforts always proved ineffective. As a result, her mother was not looked upon favourably in the child’s present-day eyes.

For abandoning them, there could be no explanation, and no forgiveness.

He was there, her father; an independent geologist, the man consulted with farmers on a variety of subjects, such as where to drill wells, or build irrigation. His home was his office; the dining room was never used for such, and instead its grand table remained draped perpetually with maps and survey reports. Thin, silver-rimmed glasses adorned his comforting, long face, his balding crown occupying an ever-increasing portion of his head, remaining hair unkempt, in a circle about that follicular wasteland, as if a monk.

Rumsfeld sensed the concern contained in the man's eyes, and moved to comfort Peter, that Christian name belonging to Adelaide's father, as he met them in the entry foyer. Peter refused to speak of his troubles, redirecting any attempt at conversation to the subject of his daughter's misbehaviour in class, one that she was reluctant to pursue, and as a result, the preparation of dinner was largely a quiet affair, interrupted only by Gig's demands for his own culinary satiation.

Lest he, God forbid, get trodden upon, or worse, Gig was not given free-run of the household; however, each room, without exception, contained a habitat for him to occupy so that Adelaide could keep him as a constant companion. An antique brass birdcage served as his sanctuary in the kitchen; this was perhaps his favourite abode for it provided the greatest variety in his nutrition, the vegetable scraps well received by the garden gastronome.

Carrots; peppers of all colours, red, green and gold; celery; corn, the kernels but not the husks; and, most preferred, Romaine lettuce, but never iceberg for that is too watery, and will encourage gastric distress in your guinea pig; these were all enjoyed by a creature whose primary purpose was to eat as much, and as often, as possible.

Not all vegetables are desirable, however; any root other than a carrot, be it onion, potato, radish and so on, is toxic to a 'cavy' -- the Latin designation for Gig's species -- and should never be consumed by one such as he. Neither should meat be offered under any circumstance, for they are strict herbivores; instead, hay ought to be provided in abundance, or grass clippings from the yard.

That particular evening, the fare was cauliflower; if given the option, this would not be Gig's first choice, but it was not discarded out-of-hand. Resigned to the relatively bland repast, he nibbled at it slowly whilst the kitchen clock monotonously signalled the slow passage of time to the otherwise unbroken silence.

Not herself fond of the blackened pork 'chops', lumpy 'mashed' potatoes and cauliflower that similarly adorned her plate, Adelaide was not taking to her traditional Thursday-evening meal with any zeal, idly picking at it in anticipation of filling her stomach instead with the more appealing pre-packaged, heavily processed product she had obtained earlier. Rumsfeld sat anxiously, beneath Gig on the kitchen floor, awaiting the imminent discarding of those unwanted rations.

Her father was having none of this, however, and matched his speed to hers; if necessary, they would stay there for the remainder of the evening, until finally, their plates were bare.

Piercing the tranquillity with his pointed words, Peter eventually spoke; Adelaide was at first sceptical of what he told her, but an acceptance was soon reached; his assertions, that Mick Hervey, the Feed and Supply proprietor, had passed away were suitably confirmed by her own earlier observations of his vacant place of business, and her dismissals were quickly muted.

Not one to openly display her emotions, she withdrew, from her father and to her bedroom on the second story, with her guinea pig, Gig. There, in private, she would permit herself to shed a tear, but only one.

Eagle returned, to receive the verdict of the deer, and was delighted to learn that they had agreed, unwilling to face the consequences of sharing a diminishing territory with the likes of the cougars and the wolves. At first light the following day, they would interfere with the humans, with heavy prayers to the Spirits that they would continue to smile upon them, and no harm would arise from that action.

The Spirits did not answer, opting to instead require the faith of the deer, the eagles, the cougars, the wolves and the bears that they would not desert them, the way they had once more forsaken Adelaide Pemberton.

FEED AND SUPPLY PROPRIETOR FOUND DEAD

ACCIDENT SUSPECTED.

by Mark Matthews, The Suffield Advertiser
October 18th, 2012

SUFFIELD, SK (CP) -- MICK HERVEY WAS FOUND DEAD YESTERDAY, apparently the victim of an accidental collapse of goods at the Suffield Feed and Supply, the business he owned and operated.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police constable Joseph Henderson describes the scene as 'unfortunate', and appears generally convinced that no foul play was involved in the sad event. "It looks like some bags of chicken-feed fell on top of him, and he knocked his head when he fell."

However, the constable cautioned that an investigation was still ongoing.

"Whenever anything like this happens, I always make a thorough investigation; no reason not to take the time and effort to do things right."

He is expected to reach a conclusion in the coming days.

CHAPTER TWO:

FROM THE PRAIRIE TO THE SEA.

PETER PEMBERTON NARROWLY AVOIDED being struck by the motorcar that careened recklessly past him on a busy Vancouver street, the young man countering the rash behaviour with a spicy retort liberally seasoned with crude expletives, none of which may be repeated here.

He was himself in a hurry, to meet his fiancée, Julia Dennison, the woman urgently requesting his presence, implying that it was a matter of life and death. Nobly, he departed swiftly from his junior post at his employer, a large geological consulting firm situated in the city's business centre, and made haste to attend her directly; this frantic response had nearly led to his premature demise under the wheels of the aforementioned automobile.

Happily, he was spared, and consequently encouraged to take greater care during his rapid excursion across the metropolitan landscape.

They met at the University of British Columbia, he an orphan from a small town on Vancouver Island, she a native of Calgary, Alberta, the province to the east. Coyly, anonymously, they would converse across the University's computing system, a giant electromechanical beast composed of vacuum tubes and solenoids named Colossus, the size of an antique road coach.

She was learning genetics, and he was studying geology; hence their 'on-line' pseudonyms, 'Genetic.girl' and 'Rock.star'. Data archaeologists have recovered small snippets of suspected conversation made between the two over amber coloured neon terminals, some of which follows here verbatim:

Rock.star@colossus: fancy meeting you here...

Genetic.girl@colossus: indeed. Rock star huh? someone thinks highly of themselves =)

Rock.star@colossus: i am the god of rock. there is no other. =P

Genetic.girl@colossus: hey, keep that tongue in your mouth, mister, unless you plan to use it.

Rock.star@colossus: *blushes*

Genetic.girl@colossus: ooh, an innocent one, huh? don't worry, when we're through you'll be quite 'experienced', if you get my drift.

Rock.star@colossus: tease.

Genetic.girl@colossus: you'll see >=D

Rock.star@colossus: i certainly hope so!

Needless to say, the majority of their discussions seem to have been rather lewd; however, society before the Fall was far more liberal regarding such subjects, perhaps contributing to its eventual collapse. A more noteworthy excerpt here, just prior to their first in-person meeting, gives a solid glimpse into their relationship dynamic:

Genetic.girl@colossus: nervous?

Rock.star@colossus: you better believe it. you'll think i smell. =(

Genetic.girl@colossus: maybe i will... i don't think i'll mind though =-*

Rock.star@colossus: =-* what if it doesn't work? i don't want to lose what we have here... are you sure it's worth the risk?

Genetic.girl@colossus: YES!

Rock.star@colossus: you'll think i smell!

Genetic.girl@colossus: I WILL NOT. you need to trust me. do you trust me?

Rock.star@colossus: i do. like no other.

Genetic.girl@colossus: then trust me now. repeat after me: 'we will get along famously.'

Rock.star@colossus: 'we will get along famously.'

Genetic.girl@colossus: >=(without the quotes, smart guy...

Rock.star@colossus: we will get along famously.

Genetic.girl@colossus: glad to hear it! see you tonight then, rock boy.

Rock.star@colossus: you will. for better or (probably) worse =/

Genetic.girl@colossus: *sigh* whatever will i do with you?

Rock.star@colossus: whatever you want. =)

Genetic.girl@colossus: be careful, i'll hold you to that...

Happily, they did indeed 'get along famously'; Peter's fears were quite unfounded, and he and Julia found great joy in each other's company. Together, they completed their education, and found respective employment there, in Vancouver, the city that played host to the University.

They took up cohabitation in a small, one-bedroom apartment situated in Kitsilano, a waterfront neighbourhood not far from the city centre, and their places of vocation. A cat was adopted; Thomas O'Malley was his name, a tabby with charming green eyes. He would sit on his perch in the window of the top-floor flat, and look out upon the water for hours on end, the endless twinkling of sunlight upon it captivating the feline.

When time permitted, Julia would practice her flute, the instrument hers since childhood, much to the contentment of both Peter and Thomas. She was a member of the local symphony, and joined it often; her solo performances provoked noteworthy emotion in her audience.

For his part, 'Rock.star' expressed his creativity upon an apparatus known as an 'electric guitar', a six-stringed wooden affair that was connected to an electronic amplifier so that it's pleasing tone might be distorted into a nightmare of noise, with his friend Stephen in an ensemble known as a 'band'.

The author would wish to state a personal opinion here, and declare that it is quite fortunate the popularity of that annoyance did not survive the Fall.

This was their existence for one year, and then two; he, the geologist, assessing land for development and she, the geneticist, working to discover the secrets behind life itself. They were quite pleased with it.

Peter's present quest to reach his mate would be without further incident; she was not in any danger, but had wonderful news. Julia was pregnant.

Wrote his friend Stephen, in his journal, of Peter's response to the revelation:

"He was overjoyed, of course, but also frightened, as a man could ever be. Responsibility does not come easy to one such as Peter; he has enough difficulty dealing with his own circumstances - - to be so wholly accountable for the fate of another is a petrifying prospect. I wish him the best of luck."

Nine months were allotted for the father-to-be to find trust in himself; that was a very tiny window of time indeed.

Meanwhile, Julia grew in girth; she suffered the typical emotional outbursts, but generally kept a firm hand on her haphazard feelings. Outside of her work, she kept herself occupied planning for the wedding that her father, Alistair, demanded take place before the birth of the child; this merely added to Peter's internal agony.

Writes Stephen:

"Julia's father is a strict man; English, I believe. There really is no arguing with him, and despite his uncertainty, Peter is destined to marry her, either willingly, or at the point of a rifle. I believe it's hard for him to imagine heading a family when he was never part of one himself; his parents died in an accident when he was quite young, and he was never adopted.

If the man is to keep his sanity, he must find a way to relieve his constant state of nervous tension."

Peter found his salvation in the source of his greatest anxiety; Julia's father, an experienced rock climber insisted, upon his arrival in Vancouver, that the geologist make a more intimate assessment of his subject matter, and accompany him on an expedition. Peter was horrified, but could not refuse his forthcoming father-in-law and, having settled his affairs lest he imminently meet his end, he went.

It was exhilarating. Peter felt truly alive for the first time, and he was subsequently addicted to the dangers presented by the perilous ascent. This timid, uncertain, insecure man became a bastion of self-confidence, gleefully taking charge in even the most dangerous of circumstances.

Alistair was surprised by the fervour with which his mountaineering protégé took to that pursuit and, although initially cautious, was impressed by not only Peter's blind courage, but also his precise skill and quick rationalization.

"I have decided," declared Alistair to his younger companion, as they sat on a rocky, snow swept peak staring out upon God's dominion, "that, rather than compel you to marry my daughter by command, I will instead offer you her hand, that of my only child, for you to do with as you please."

Peter was happy then, for he was free, emancipated from his enforced obligation, and at liberty to choose his own destiny; that, he promptly decided, was to marry Julia, willing, proud, and ready to face his responsibilities to her, to their child and, most of all, to himself.

Stephen was Peter's 'best man'. Said he of the wedding:

"I have never seen a more joyous couple on that most tedious of days. The pastor was detained; the cake never arrived; a sunny, rigidly structured garden ceremony became a soggy, sodden calamity of chaos. In short, this was the best wedding that it has been my good fortune to attend, for those who were being celebrated were themselves genuinely celebrating, and no adversity could quiet their enthusiasm.

To them, I say *bon chance*."

As was the custom at the time, Julia kept her maiden name. Eventually, she hoped to adopt a hyphenated surname; however, this was not a priority, and became forgotten as time passed by.

Thomas O'Malley would sleep carefully on Julia's lap, purring softly to the infant contained inside his mistress's abdomen while, during the final days of her pregnancy, the geneticist would busy herself reading scientific journals, jotting down hypotheses and conjecture in their margins. The feline's musings were apparently quite soothing, for the child was, although large, quite peaceful, and she was delivered without incident.

It was a girl, named Adelaide, after the birthplace of her grandmother on her mother's side, the elder having succumbed to cancer some twenty years before and, after great deliberation, Pemberton, for her father, also typical of the era.

Despite great efforts at discouragement, Thomas continued his comforting efforts after the child was free of the womb, sneaking into her crib at any opportunity and laying alongside her, providing warmth and calm. He was her living 'teddy-bear', and he would never do a single thing to cause her injury or distress.

The lengths the cat would go to so that he might be with Adelaide were quite remarkable.

Meanwhile, her mother resumed her studies inside the tiny apartment while Peter feverishly searched for larger accommodation; stymied by low vacancy rates and unaffordable terms, his efforts were unsuccessful, and Alistair strongly lobbied that Julia should return, with husband and child, to Calgary. A Doctor of Biology, and a professor at the university there, he would make his daughter a member of his research team, and his granddaughter would have room to grow.

She refused; her own team was on the cusp of a breakthrough, and she would not abandon her work over such a small, trifling matter as living space. They would simply have to make do.

This argument continued for several years, becoming quite heated whenever the young Pembertons would visit Alistair in Calgary, over successive Christmastimes. Graciously declining his request on yet another occasion, they would withdraw at the holiday's conclusion, winding back through the mountains and the forests that captivated the young Adelaide so, the awesome peaks staring down upon her like the titans of Greek legend, inspiring in her not only a healthy respect for nature, but a temerity to one day learn mastery over it.

Of a suitable age to attend a pre-school, her mother quickly became willing to relinquish Adelaide to one, and return to her laboratory to eagerly resume her explorations.

Successes were not long in coming.

PLAYING GOD

RE-WRITING THE CODE

by Diane Jaimeson, The Vancouver Sun

August 23rd, 2006

VANCOUVER (CP) -- WHEN JULIA DENNISON goes to work in the morning, she isn't exactly embarking upon what one would generally consider to be a usual weekday.

Julia is a geneticist, and she does something that very few people have ever done, create new life.

"It's just like flipping a switch," she says casually, sipping on her morning latté. "Except that there are millions of switches, and each switch affects thousands of others."

Complex as that sounds, it is apparent that Julia has a knack for it.

Under contract with horticultural specialist JE Wembly, Dennison has been responsible for several new strains of genetically modified (or GM) grains, fruits and vegetables that can survive in extraordinary climates, battle pests and even help each other thrive.

"Imagine a field of strawberries thriving under an orchard of peach trees, the berries gaining nourishment from tendrils that snake up from the tree's roots far below, allowing for the ultimate in water and sunlight use-efficiency." Her eyes brighten.

"Now, imagine that we could do this with a half dozen plants, each taking what is necessary for their survival, and passing on what they do not to their neighbour."

As wondrous as this new technology might be, it has its share of detractors.

"Genetically modified foods are wrong," says Pastor John Wright, head of the British Columbia Campaign Against Mutagenic Experimentation, or CAME. "You can't just 'flip a switch' like it's yours to do with as you please. It's a part of creation, and we have no right to tamper with such divine providence."

"Is it divine will to allow people to starve?" counters Dennison, obviously angry at the Pastor's assertions. "We've saved tens of thousands of lives through drought-resistant grains, and pestilence-proof vegetables. Would the Church have these people die for the sake of theology? Absurd!"

Regardless of where you may stand, every day more governments approve the growing and sale of GM foods. The only question is: where do we go next?

There's something unsettling about Julia's response. "Why, up the food chain, of course! Where else?"

Where else, indeed!

Peter was proud of Julia, and happy to assume domestic responsibilities whilst his wife strove to save the planet from starvation under the weight of its burgeoning population. The time they spent together was limited, but precious; this did, however, lead to Adelaide bonding far more with her father than her mother.

Ironically, it was the senior Dennison that would relocate, to the coast; a project had obviously captivated his interest and engaged his expertise, but he was not given to disclose any details, not even to his family. Adelaide was pleased to have the more frequent presence of her grandfather nonetheless, and Peter and Alistair would scale the local peaks on an almost weekly basis, constantly striving to impress the other with his mountaineering abilities.

Sadly, this utopia was to be short-lived, for hushed discussions presumed to be removed from Adelaide's range of hearing grew in intensity over the following months, increasing in urgency and alarm.

Then, everything changed. Wrote Stephen:

"Like a madman, Peter called me in an obviously frantic state to make his apologies for, and under what reasoning I am incapable to fathom, terminating our relationship. I am, and quite understandably so, distressed by this development, but at a complete loss as to what I can do. If I believe that he is operating within the realm of sanity, then I must respect his wishes.

"However, if I suspect his departure is disingenuous, then I must pursue him, for he is my fellow, and would be in need of my aid."

Without warning, Peter took Adelaide, and they left without ceremony.

Stephen appears convinced regarding his friend's motives; he does not mention the affair any further; neither is any trace of Peter, Julia nor Adelaide found in his journals. His association appears to have, at that point, been permanently severed.

On her part, and despite her father's assurances that it was for the best, 'the right thing' for them to do, Adelaide could not help but blame her mother, absent and secretive, the apparent instigator of her untimely removal from her happy home, her beloved grandfather, and her precious Thomas.

Perhaps that last one was the most hurtful of all Julia's transgressions, for she felt that the cat, aged and ailing, could not travel, and must stay. Regardless, there would be no convincing a five year-old girl of this rationale, the child's selfishness and jealousy equal to that she attributed to her mother; regrettably, a deep hatred was born.

Through the mountains she would journey, with only her father, for one final time, to a land she easily despised, a land of extreme temperatures, of stifling summer heat and frigid winter cold, of plain geography and little interest to Adelaide, the girl 'from the coast'.

Despite her repeated petitions, Peter would never grant her a revisiting of those mountains, and he would do so without explanation. She would even attempt to run away from him, once, but the authorities intercepted her road coach in Calgary, a mere two hundred kilometres from the terrain that she loved so much; she was consequently returned, kicking and screaming, to her prairie prison, resigned to exist there for the remainder of her days.

Or, at the very least, those of her childhood.

Seemingly forevermore, the forest world of the Eagle, the Bear, the Cougar and the Deer would exist only in Adelaide's adolescent imagination.

TWELVE DEAD IN RESEARCH LAB KILLINGS

INDUSTRIAL SABOTAGE SUSPECTED

by Ralph Summerton, The Vancouver Sun

March 16th, 2008

VANCOUVER (CP) -- A GRUESOME SPECTACLE awaited security personnel when they arrived for their morning shift at Mornington Labs in North Vancouver early yesterday morning.

Eight scientists, presumably working late into the previous night, appear to have been surprised after an unknown assailant killed four guards, and disabled monitoring equipment.

An investigation is currently underway.

CHAPTER THREE:

GUINEAS PIGGUS.

DESPITE GIG'S INCESSANT 'POPCORNING', the guinea pig custom of displaying excitement through full-body spasms, Adelaide could not be deterred from her present activity: lying flat on her back upon her bed, staring at the ceiling above, vaguely pondering the mystery of a hole, sealed, presumably leading into the attic.

His efforts on the mattress unsuccessful, he clambered up onto the girl's chest, and resumed his activity in the hopes that she might take enough interest in her pet to rub him upon the bridge of his nose, or scratch him under his chin the way he loved so dearly. Unfortunately, it appeared her melancholy had set in a great deal, for these attempts came to naught, and Gig eventually became still, 'wheeling' quietly to himself whilst his mistress contemplated the meaning of the universe.

Mick Hervey was dead; the man like a surrogate grandfather to her, this was an understandably disturbing development to Adelaide.

"You know where your name comes from?" he had asked her, the first time they had met, whilst purchasing hay for Elmore, the 'time-share' horse Adelaide rode on weekends; she was only eight at the time.

"No," she answered. "It's a place somewhere, isn't it?"

"Right you are. It's a city, in Australia. Where I'm from."

"That's far away." Adelaide looked up at the grizzled, grey-bearded man as if he was an adventure-hero from an aging motion picture. "It must be exciting there."

The old man laughed. "Not as much as you might think. Well, aside from the crocodiles. They'll sneak up behind you," he said, as he slowly advanced upon the girl, "and then STRIKE."

He lunged at her; she screamed, and ran behind the legs of her father, who laughed. "That's a good one, Mick," he chortled, as

the girl, realizing that she was the subject of his mirth, kicked him in the shin.

Adelaide was not the most polite of children.

In fact, after she had been forcefully relocated to the dusty wasteland she was required to call 'home', a campaign of terror commenced wherein the goal was to extract as much penance from the world as was feasibly possible. In short, she was, what was referred to in the common-day vernacular as, a 'brat'.

"Now, there's no need for that sort of behaviour," chided Old Mick, "now, is there?"

Looking up at his kind features strangely calmed the perpetually irate girl; it was if she knew him from somewhere, that he was an old friend, a confidant, and she took an unusual heed of his words.

She bowed her head. "Sorry," she mumbled.

Peter assumed a mocking, shocked expression. "Well, call the papers. Adelaide Pemberton actually apologized for something!"

"I could kick you again," Adelaide warned.

"Here, have a lolly," interjected Mick, in an effort to stave off any further violence. The redheaded firestick took the candy, and her disrespectful parent was momentarily forgotten.

From that point on, Adelaide looked forward to seeing Old Mick with a greater anticipation than that of riding Elmore the horse, which had been her favourite pastime, then superseded.

Adelaide sighed, lying on her back, upon the bed; the outburst sponsored renewed life in Gig, who resumed his attention-seeking routine so that he might receive some much-desired affection. He would be rewarded; the girl would rub the bridge of his nose, and pet him under his chin in the way he liked so very much.

Gig was, for the time being, a very happy guinea pig.

It was a small room. The mattress, a double-width bed that was present when the Pemberton's took occupancy, maintained position in a corner, pressed against two walls, utilizing about a

third of the available space. There was a dresser, upon which stood Gig's sleeping quarters, his 'private apartment': a three-level, plastic-bottomed wire cage.

That word, 'cage', was never uttered in the guinea pig's presence, however, for he was a free creature; they were merely protecting him from predators, and themselves. For that, Gig was very grateful; as a prey animal, his natural instinct is to seek protection and shelter from the multitude of threats that mean to hurt him, or worse.

There was an electronic device known as a 'television'; similar in construction to the monochromatic data terminals employed by her parents for their early romantic exchanges, this version was much larger, and displayed its images in colour. Programmes were transmitted as radio signals, through the air, and intercepted by dipole antennae colloquially termed 'rabbit's ears'.

Although presenting great potential for wide-scale educational advancement, commercialism in broadcasting resulted in loosely-described 'entertainment' that pandered to the lowest common denominator; those last three words could easily sum up the socio-political landscape of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Indeed, Adelaide would switch on that appliance presently and, as one would have expected, select a pre-recorded performance known as a 'situational comedy', a genre designed to paradoxically obtain humour from the contradictions inherent in the culture of the day. It has been recently argued that very little true enjoyment was derived from these diversions, since 'laugh-tracks' were overlayed on the audio to prompt the audience's sardonic participation; there has been little offered by modern psychology to explain this anthropological curiosity.

Finally, a 'home computer', a cube similar in dimensions to the household ovens of the day, occupied the remaining space, crowned with an amber, monochromatic terminal not unlike those described earlier. Adelaide was expected to employ this apparatus in the pursuit of academic enlightenment, but would instead use it to mindlessly babble towards millions of people who would only respond in kind, to no net benefit.

One might get the impression that the author overstates the time before the Fall as a hedonistic orgy of consumption and self-gratification, but one would be mistaken. There is no exaggeration, and the reader would do well to accept these depictions, as ridiculous as they may seem, as the truth for that is indeed what they are. I digress --

Her amusement containing none, Adelaide's mind drifted.

A deer lounged lazily in a large, yellow metal cup, fastened to the end of a robotic arm, itself attached to a like-coloured box balanced on two rubber-rimmed discs. A human stood a few metres away, confused regarding the extraordinary presence of the animal on his machine, required to continue the demolition of the forest in front of him, his assigned task.

This circumstance was common to his colleagues; their equipment similarly sported the adornment of deer, and they were all equally frustrated by an inability to formulate any solution to their predicament. Attempts to frighten the creatures away had failed; they were mysteriously dedicated to their stations, as if they were organized, and had set upon a unified purpose.

Of course, such a notion was absurd, for they were deer, after all, and had nothing beyond instinctual intelligence. Still, external assistance would be required to resolve the matter, and a man was dispatched to find that aid.

Eagle, floating high above, celebrated for it appeared that they had found success in the deer's disobedience, and that the forest would be spared any further defilement at the hands of the encroaching humans. Inevitably, the men would be forced to withdraw; unable to continue, they would focus their attentions elsewhere.

All that need be done was for the deer to wait them out.

A shot sounded, and Eagle frantically searched for the source, terrified that the moratorium on killing deer had been consequently abandoned, and violence had broken out. A second retort was quickly heard, but no men were observed firing, and the deer appeared unharmed.

"Dearest Deer," cried Eagle, swooping down on the scene below, "are you in danger?"

“It appears not,” Deer replied. “These sounds appear to be coming from beyond the forest, perhaps even from another world --”

A third shot sounded, from the speakers inset below the television’s picture tube, and Adelaide snapped back to awareness, coming to the prompt rationalization that the ‘comedic’ programme had concluded, and a plot-driven depiction of violence and crime had commenced. She yawned and stretched, recovering from her daydream; noting the hour, Adelaide retrieved her ‘cell phone’, a bulky communications device, from her backpack and sent a message to Jeremy inquiring as to if she might visit him that evening.

A few minutes passed whilst police pursued evil men upon the television’s display, and then an electronically generated, metallic melody emanated from the radio-driven telephone, signalling Jeremy’s acceptance of Adelaide’s proposal.

Due in no small part to Adelaide’s earlier behaviour at school, it was readily assumed that Peter would not willingly permit his daughter to misuse time better spent studying on meaningless social interaction. Thus, she would be required to escape the premises undetected. Stowing Gig away in his habitat for the evening, she moved toward the window, and the ladder that served as a fire escape anchored beneath it, outside.

Gig wheeled.

Quietly at first, but with greater volume the closer Adelaide moved towards the window, his vocalizations continued in spite of the girl’s generous offerings of food, calming reassurances of her swift return, or chastisements of the guinea pig’s vexing conduct.

In her journal, Adelaide conjectures that Gig was somehow aware of either his previous guardian’s fate, or his present servant’s feelings towards that calamity; either way, she would be obliged to permit Gig to chaperone her rendezvous lest the creature alert Adelaide’s father to his daughter’s absence.

That would not do at all.

Therefore, Adelaide possessed a certain guinea pig in her jacket pocket when she carefully made her way from the window, and slowly crept down the ladder, to the ground below.

Intended only to save lives in the event of an emergency, rungs existed for only a few metres, and the girl would be required to drop a short distance, landing on a bed formerly of flowers, long since overrun with thistles and chickweed.

"Fiddlesticks," exclaimed Adelaide as she failed to execute the manoeuvre gracefully, falling backwards upon her posterior.

To circumvent criticism of this account, the author must interject some minor commentary here:

It will be freely admitted that Adelaide Pemberton did not, in fact, say the word 'fiddlesticks' in response to her misfortune. Indeed, it is a matter of public record that she did instead make use of a wide variety of rather deplorable examples of expletives and epithets -- she more than adequately details these in her journal entry regarding the events of that evening.

Some readers may accuse me of engaging in 'revisionist history', and that my censorship somehow perverts and cheapens the authenticity of this account; however, I would counter that publishing such divisive, derisive and rude phraseology provides no discernable benefit to this work.

Furthermore, I would argue that disseminating that language in context might encourage a resurgence of its use and, whether you believe our modern society is impervious to such moral decay or not, this is not a risk I feel that any of us is truly willing to take.

And so --

"Fiddlesticks," Adelaide did not precisely exclaim as she failed to execute the manoeuvre gracefully, falling backwards upon her posterior. She must have struck a rock, for she details the experience as an exceptionally painful one; it took several minutes for her to recover, under the watchful eye of Rumsfeld, stationed in the backyard, before her foray to the house on the adjacent property recommenced.

A two-meter high wooden fence separated the lots, and a climb of it was mandatory. Since squashing Gig in the process of surmounting it was not a preferable outcome, Adelaide carefully tossed her jacket, guinea pig within, over the obstacle, and then,

with an amount of relative difficulty resultant from her recent injury, she shortly followed.

The majority of the trial was then concluded, for Jeremy's bedroom resided upon the first floor of his home, and very little exertion was required to enter it through its open window.

Jeremy was transfixed with an interactive electronic amusement connected to his television.

"Hi," Adelaide said. Intent upon succeeding at whatever trivial task he had embarked upon, Jeremy merely grunted an acknowledgement of her presence, and did not remove his attention from the display.

His guest sat down upon his bed, and removed her furry companion from the jacket, tossed upon the floor prior to her entrance.

"No," Jeremy disagreed, raising an arm, and extending his index finger in an expression of objection, "you are not putting him on my bed. He peed on it last time." His eyes did not wander from the screen.

"I'm sure he did no such thing. He's a perfectly polite pig."

Jeremy harrumphed. "He's a rodent."

"A CAVY," Adelaide retorted emphatically, "not a rodent."

"Whatever."

Adelaide stuck out her tongue, and 'thumbed her nose' at him.

"I saw that."

"I don't care." In defiance, Adelaide placed Gig on Jeremy's bed despite his concern. Coincidentally, unable to control his bladder, Gig subsequently emptied it.

Jeremy's struggle against his binary opponent carried on, while Adelaide looked on with general disinterest.

"What's that?" the curious eight-year old girl inquired of Mister Hervey, the old Australian feed-store proprietor regarding

the small bundle of fur sitting contentedly in the breast pocket of his plaid flannelette shirt.

“Why that? Oh, that’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” insisted the child, “it’s MOVING.”

“It’s nothing,” he repeated, turning away from the inquisitive Adelaide.

“Mister Hervey!” she shrieked. “Let me see!”

The man rotated back towards her slowly, gradually removing the creature from his pocket, and exhibiting it upon his hand.

Disappointed: “It’s a rat.”

“This, dear girl, is no rat. He’s a guinea pig.”

“What’s a guinea pig?”

“Well, the story goes that there’s a small island in the South Pacific, where some British sailors discovered them a few hundred years ago. They squeal like pigs and eat like them too, but they make good pets, and so the ship returned to England with a few.”

This is incorrect; guinea pigs are actually natives of South America.

“Only a few?”

“They reproduce rather quickly.”

“Okay,” said Adelaide, satisfied with that explanation, “but why guinea?”

“No one’s sure. Either it was because it was thought they were found near New Guinea, or they cost a guinea. That was a denomination of British currency.”

There is no clear explanation for this, so one of Mick’s assertions might have been accurate.

“Guinea pig,” Adelaide nodded slowly.

“Would you like to hold him?” Old Mick offered, extending his hand towards the girl, who accepted his offer graciously.

“Hello, Mister Pinnygig.”

The pup was small, but had the largest nose the child had, in that proportion, ever seen. It was white, set upon a face that sported brown cheeks, and black forehead. Two tiny ears perched atop that, and two dark eyes, set apart and toward the sides, like a fish, seemed to stare up at Adelaide, with curiosity -- and fear.

She was enthralled. “Can I keep him?” Adelaide pleaded in the cutest voice she could muster.

“That’s up to your father.”

Peter returned from the task of loading a single bale of hay into his diminutive Japanese motorcar. “Can I keep him?” came his daughter’s immediate appeal; its abruptness intended to startle her father, and trigger an off-hand agreement, she repeated the request several times in rapid succession.

He would not be so easily fooled.

“You already have a dog. And a horse. Remember the horse?”

A pout formed on Adelaide’s face, and her arms crossed in annoyance. “Yes. I remember the horse,” she responded, snidely; “But,” she continued, “I also want a guinea pig.”

“You don’t always get what --”

“A word, Peter?” interrupted Mick, his tone of voice urgent somehow. The two adults retreated for a private discussion, while Adelaide stroked the quietly gurgling guinea pig.

“I think I shall call you Gig,” the girl declared softly to her newfound friend.

Gig he would be, for her father would return expressing agreement regarding the guinea pig’s adoption, having apparently been persuaded by the old Australian that it might be wise to honour Adelaide’s wishes in the matter.

She was pleased, and so was Gig.

“Old Mister Hervey died,” said the older Adelaide, intruding upon Jeremy’s entertainment.

"Yeah, I know," Jeremy replied, a measure of sadness contained in his voice. "He was a nice guy."

Referring to his father, the local Royal Canadian Mounted Police constable: "Dad says it 'looks like'," placing verbal inverted commas around those previous two words, "an accident."

"'Looks like'," mimicked Adelaide cautiously, with similar emphasis.

"Yeah."

Pensive, she sat, in silence, while Jeremy carried on with his seemingly endless fight against technology, and tried not to permit her imagination the luxury of expanding upon the sinister overtones of her friend's disclosure.

Gig climbed upon her lap, and wheeked softly for attention; his guardian stroked him gently while she sent her mind away, back to the forest where deer were practicing peaceful civil disobedience against loggers intent upon razing their home.

"To the deer," cheered Bear, pleased at Eagle's progress report.

"To the deer," echoed the squirrels, in chorus.

Cougar snarled. "It won't work."

"And why is that, Cougar?" queried Eagle, incredulously. "It seems to be working quite well, in fact."

"Because they're humans, savages. They routinely kill each other for less gain." He paused. "What makes you think they won't do away with a few deer to get what they want."

Eagle responded with shaken confidence, "It appears to be against their rules."

"Rules!" Cougar laughed, or did whatever cougars do to express scorn, and encountered only a shocked silence, his jocularly all that was required to articulate his ominous argument.

"You poor, poor naive fools." Cougar stalked away, his desire to disrupt the festivities fulfilled, leaving the others to contemplate upon the wisdom of their actions in the face of one obvious truth.

MELODY AYRES-GRIFFITHS

Man is inherently malevolent, and never to be trusted.

Never.

CHAPTER FOUR:

EVIL, INCORPORATED.

INTRODUCING MISTER JOHN SMITH.

A Caucasian fellow in his fifties, he rises from his seat at a vast, round table to greet the man to his right, recently arrived.

His name is Mister John Smith, a Caucasian fellow in his fifties.

Formalities concluded, John, the former, and Smith, the latter, sit. To their left is an empty seat, meant to be filled by John Smith, tardy.

There are twenty-four chairs, allocated to two-dozen Caucasian men in their fifties, all known only as John Smith. This anonymity is perhaps of the greatest importance, for these men make decisions that directly affect the lives -- and deaths -- of millions of people.

However, this is not an altruistic organization; it exists to benefit only itself and its members, some of the most foul criminals history has ever known. Each only interested in his own personal gain, John Smith, the former, the latter and every other man seated there will do whatever is required to advance their fortunes, or protect them.

Ordinarily, these men take action on a large scale, manufacturing wars in remote lands, or destroying rival corporations. Cold and impersonal, any harm done is of no consequence to them; they are the penultimate sociopaths, devoid of empathy and incapable of sympathy.

A typical meeting might bring about the demise of hundreds, the poverty of thousands, and at its conclusion, the men will depart, to return to the world at large, to their gargantuan estates with wives they do not love and children that exist solely to carry on a legacy of murder and misdeed.

This particular gathering, deep in the third sub-basement of some monolithic skyscraper, would not be quite so detached and impersonal, for a situation had developed, as they did every so often, that required more direct intervention.

Mister Ajax, his name sardonically derived from a familiar household cleanser of the day, stood patiently in the elevator while it descended to the level of his employers, the Messrs Smith. He was never summoned lightly; a highly trained professional, the fees for his services were commonly quite substantial.

Of course, as he always completed his tasks with excellence, every penny was well spent.

A man in his thirties, of African lineage, Ajax was an assassin.

Not just any mere 'hired gun', he could easily match wits with even the brightest of government agents; Ajax was simply a freelancer, responsible only to himself, free to do as he pleased -- and be paid well for it.

Discussion regarding the current issue had ended just prior to Mister Ajax's entrance into the room with the round table and the Smiths. Nothing less than complete erasure of all parties, documents and associated elements would prove satisfactory in this case, for the danger that it presented to all of those in attendance was indeed grave.

Veiled behind a curtain drawn to mask their identities, and keep them safe from the potential threat posed by Mister Ajax should he embark upon a regrettable crusade of mass extortion, the Smiths outlined their difficulty.

It was absurd.

Ajax had great trouble containing his incredulity, and very nearly lost his composure on two, or three short occasions during his briefing. Apparently, these men, these rich and powerful men, who controlled Presidents and Kings, were afraid of rodents.

Not mice, nor rats, gerbils or hamsters, it was guinea pigs that struck such fright into the Smiths.

Guinea pigs.

Envisioning Hamlet, his daughter Aleisha's pet guinea pig, it was somehow humorous that such an innocuous little creature might hold the potential to destroy those who ruled the world. A small piece of Ajax, deep within, considered the delicious prospect of permitting their financial Armageddon to proceed unhindered; it would be quite amusing to witness their ruin in such a nonsensical fashion.

Regrettably, this would in turn lead to the abrupt devaluation of his own personal fortunes; that would not do, and hence he would proceed to systematically murder a herd of guinea pigs in order to maintain the status quo, and keep his future secure, as unbelievable as those rodent's alleged crimes may be.

They recycled.

Genetically engineered, the pigs would purportedly eat refuse, specifically plastics, and secrete a clean-burning petroleum jelly as a result.

Ajax chuckled; although not quite the goose that laid the golden egg, this was startlingly close. The Earth had developed a vast quantity of non-biodegradable rubbish since the end of the Second World War; if these creatures could be utilized to not only clean up that eyesore but, at the same time, produce a refined, pure source of energy, the world would certainly be a much better place.

However, a great deal was invested in oil; the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries relied upon petroleum for much of its development and operation. A limited commodity, it was a cornerstone of capitalism, the 'free market' where the concepts of supply and demand led a gasoline-addicted populace to pay exorbitant amounts of money so that they might carry on with their opulent lifestyles if only for a little while longer.

This had made the Smiths very rich, potentially obscenely so. Therefore, as with the fuel cell driven motorcar, cold fusion and many other projects beneficial to humanity at large, the guinea pigs would need to be dealt with -- quickly.

Ordinarily, this would require only bribery, corporate takeover or public discrediting of the technology involved, not murder. However, this particular research was being conducted by a not-for-profit organization in Canada, funded by grants from

anonymous, subversive supporters who would gleefully see the end of the 'American way of life'.

Of course, thought Ajax, it made perfect sense for the Canadians to be responsible; in hindsight, those dirty socialists ought to have been invaded decades ago. 'C'est la vie', as they say.

A secret project, those in charge were unknown, and could not consequently be blackmailed or coerced; neither could public disclosure and scorn be employed without unreasonable risk. No, immediate and decisive action would be required to put a halt to this nonsense before it became impossible to contain.

As such, Ajax's services were required.

Posing as a biologist with an environmentally sympathetic background, Ajax would gain employment within the organization, and then snuff it out like a candle, infiltrating computer systems and erasing data, disposing of laboratory subjects and specimens, and silencing personnel -- permanently.

This would be quite the departure from Ajax's typical assignments -- political assassinations, the removal of uncooperative corporate management -- but it was definitely not beyond his talents; indeed, the prospect of such a challenge excited him immensely, and he was eager to proceed.

It would be fair to state that his daughter would not have approved.

HELPING GUINEA PIGS HELP THEMSELVES

BIOLOGIST SEEKS TO CURE CAVY DISEASES

by Alice Terrance, The Vancouver Sun
September 22nd, 2007

VANCOUVER (CP) -- GUINEA PIGS HAVE long since provided scientists with an efficient method of researching cures and testing vaccines that have saved countless human lives.

Now it's their turn.

"We owe so much to all of those animals we sacrificed in the name of our own medicine," says William Frankston. "It's time we helped them, for a change."

Frankston, a biologist, has been privately researching cures for common guinea pig diseases, most notably intestinal infections.

"These can be awfully hard to treat, and are often visibly asymptomatic; that is, you don't know the guinea pig has an infection until it dies. This is very sad."

Happily, he has discovered a solution.

"I've been able to isolate a breed of guinea pig that has better resistance to the common types of intestinal bacteria. A genetic comparison should be able to identify the gene responsible, and we could then switch this on in other breeds as well."

He will have then built a better guinea pig.

Unfortunately, William does not have the facilities to do the extensive genetic research required. "It's frustrating," he laments. "Nobody wants to expend the effort 'just to help a guinea pig'. After all they've done for us."

With any luck, Frankston will find a patron soon, and his work will continue. "Help me give something back," he pleads.

"It is the right thing to do."

Ajax, also known as William Frankston, soon found himself approached by an enigmatic entity that would communicate by only e-mail, through an untraceable address. He was asked a great many questions concerning his research, but the Smiths had constructed an elaborate deception with which to disguise their agent, and provided Ajax with all he needed to persuade his anonymous inquisitor regarding the legitimacy of his work.

The bait soon taken by those he sought, William would inevitably be invited to participate in a secretive program presently conducting genetic studies involving guinea pigs. Part of a team of ten, they reported to that same nameless individual, known only as 'J', that had interviewed their latest addition so extensively; much to Ajax's frustration, he was unable to garner any further information pertaining to his secondary employer, and that obscurity remained.

Nonetheless, he blended in well, and found himself in an excellent position to accomplish his mission.

His immediate superior, an apparently English gentleman named Alistair Dennison who would bore William with pedestrian

tales of his mountaineering exploits, provided the only real unease; the agent had the poor feeling that, the man's mundane adventures aside, there was much more to the biologist than it seemed from casual inspection.

Ajax was also quickly convinced Alistair did not trust him, either.

Once again, however, the spectre of a genuine challenge only excited the assassin further, and he relished the verbal swordplay he engaged in with Alistair, each doing his best to compel the other to inadvertently 'show his hand', and reveal his true nature.

Not merely enough to pretend, Alistair's constant questioning forced the sleep-deprived William to spend his evenings earning his forged credentials, lest he fail one of Dennison's tests and lend credence to the Englishman's suspicions. In turn, his superior struggled to keep continuity in matters relating to his personal life, careful not to reveal too much, or little information, each equally detrimental to his own façade.

No one could know about Julia. She no longer existed, a non-entity scribbled out of history by covert forces seeking change, which hoped to overthrow the present order through innovation. Although extensive background checks were done on all members of the research team, they were well aware that these were not infallible, and Alistair would need to be vigilant.

He never had a daughter, and that 'fact' could not be forgotten.

Remarkably, William's impromptu education led him to fulfil his promise. With his assistance, the team resolved an issue surrounding the guinea pig's digestion, in the process isolating the gene that provided resistance to intestinal bacteria.

Ironically, the one sent to destroy the project would lead to its success.

Ajax built a better guinea pig, one that could withstand the stressors caused by the biological mechanism of turning plastic into petroleum jelly.

Alistair, positive that William was authentic, would consequently give him the security clearances he needed to

undertake his dastardly plan, and destroy all that they had toiled so hard to accomplish.

Doctor Dennison would regret this critical error for the rest of his life.

There was a party held in William's honour, with music and wine. Ajax was so proud of his accomplishment, he found himself almost persuaded to forsake his obligation to the Smiths, and adopt his new persona completely. He had never before felt quite so satisfied as he had then; it was with some despondency that he concluded that the men circling the round table deep beneath some monolithic skyscraper would by no means permit him to abandon them so, and his death at the hands of another was a certain repercussion.

An unsuitable outcome, it was left to William Frankston to ensure his own continued financial, never mind personal wellbeing, and finish his assignment.

After quietly executing a clandestine application on his personal workstation, one that would disable the video recording devices situated throughout the facility, William would politely excuse himself from the festivities, and then proceed directly to the guard's station where he would make brief, jovial conversation with the security personnel that concluded with their abrupt, violent departure from this world.

Making his return, Ajax would utilize well trained hands, and sharp knife to deal with those who had strayed from their fellows, before descending upon the group that remained with a quiet fury, fostered perhaps by the emotional agony still painfully felt regarding the divorce from his wife, and the destruction of his family.

Alternatively, the chronic discomfort he suffered as a consequence of his broken tailbone might have provided his inspiration; either way, it was soon over, and his colleagues were all dead.

Except Alistair, who was not there.

William froze, in fear and panic at the terrible revelation that he had failed; his mission could not be completed. His turmoil only grew at the discovery of the missing guinea pig. Praying

heavily that both errant scientist and cavy would soon reappear, he proceeded to destroy the remaining subjects, and launch a computer virus that would erase all data pertaining to the project, including all copies, on all systems, everywhere.

Even, and of this he was quite confident, the information held by the nebulous 'J', whereabouts then known to Ajax through his newly advanced security clearance, and to whom the assassin would hopefully proceed -- shortly.

All that stood in his path was the knowledge held by one English scientist, and the genetics possessed by a single remaining guinea pig.

The telephone rang.

"Hello, William," started Alistair, shrouded anxiety still vaguely evident in his voice. "Is everything all right?"

"Of course," replied Ajax cheerily. "We're just waiting on you, sir. Where are you?"

"I'll be returning soon. Could you put Samuel on the line, please?"

Samuel was dead, of course, and in no shape to take a telephone call.

"I'm afraid he's detained." The tone of his timbre was whimsical, merry and completely devoid of concern.

"How about Lewis?"

No longer a member of the living human race, Lewis was also incapable of any dialogue.

"No, no -- he's not available either."

"I see." A pause. "Well, I will see you in a few minutes then. Cheerio."

Alistair disconnected.

One thing William could, at that point, be absolutely certain of was the reality that his superior was indeed not coming; somehow, the 'jig was up'. He ran, then, quickly but calmly, racing

to Doctor Dennison's residence with faint optimism that his quarry would still be there, and had not yet fled.

Much to his dismay, they had, man and cavy, both gone.

A subsequent journey to the digitally determined location of 'J' was also maddeningly unrewarding, for all that was discovered there was an empty house, vacant of all save a single laptop, effectively bereft of any useful information courtesy of Ajax's own cleverly programmed eraser.

He had no Alistair, no 'J' and no guinea pig. Life was not then merely a literal, but a metaphorical pain in the backside for one particular contract killer left, in the wake of his failure, to swiftly establish a revised, and assured to be effective course of action.

The Smiths were contacted; the situation briefly explained, their powers over local law-enforcement would be exercised to the fullest in an unsanctioned manhunt. Manifests of passengers by air and sea were scrupulously scrutinized; all motorcars leaving the Vancouver metropolitan area were stopped and searched for the presence of a genetically modified guinea pig.

Tense minutes ticked on into hours without any word of Dennison's capture, while Ajax sat quietly in the missing scientist's study, and worked to resolve the riddle of the man's whereabouts. He must be in the city; the Smiths' contacts were quite extensive, and Alistair could not have escaped the dragnet that presently surrounded the area. All transportation arteries were under strict surveillance.

However, the Dennison residence was strangely free of any documentation that could indicate where he might be hiding. In fact, it was oddly sanitary of any personal information at all; no receipts, no invoices, nor bank statements or correspondence of any kind could be found. His computers had also been wiped clean, but not from Ajax's virus -- a 'panic button' mechanism had apparently been utilized to stymie unwelcome investigation.

If not aware of the agent's presence directly, it was obvious that Alistair was certainly conscious of an external threat, and had taken great care to ensure that, in the event a situation had occurred, he could avoid being tracked.

So, there sat Ajax, in the sterile study, without a shred of precious information with which to continue his hunt, frustrated and dejected. His mind wandered, and eyes drifted about randomly at the various, useless scientific journals that occupied several meters of shelf-space, the stacks of outdated college textbooks that littered the room, eventually becoming transfixed on one particular, noteworthy periodical, and freeing the assassin from his mental doldrums.

“A man must always be prepared to shed the trappings of society, and roam free, of his own accord,” Dennison had pontificated during one of his frequent sermons regarding personal independence. Perhaps poor William, forced to listen to Alistair *ad-nauseum*, had developed a mental block; this may have prevented him from seeing the obvious earlier, but it failed to matter for right in front of Ajax’s celebrating eyes was the key to unlocking the mystery behind his prey’s evasion.

The publication was titled “Mountaineering Monthly”.

Dennison had gone on foot. To elude pursuit, he would take to the alpine, the rougher the better, for that was simply the kind of man he was. He would head northeast, away from Canada’s densely populated southern quarter, his destination somewhere small, unobtrusive and ‘off the radar’.

This would be Ajax’s biggest challenge. He was not naïve; it might be years before he would find Alistair again, but he would have the luxury of time -- those he hunted would not risk public exposure, well aware of the adversity awaiting them.

Like rabbits, they would hide, and the wolf would patiently search them out.

Then, he would feast on their flesh, and revel in his victory.

CHAPTER FIVE:

A WOLF IN THE FOLD.

GIG WHEEKED, LONG AND LOUD.

“Quiet, Pig!” shouted the previously slumbering Adelaide, her dreams rudely interrupted by the piercing vocalizations of her pet, himself prompted to action by the noise of her father, Peter, opening the refrigerator in the kitchen, below.

Opening her eyes to observe the curious, but still unexplored entrance, to the attic, nestled in the ceiling above, she was promptly forced, by a searing pain in her backside, to flip over, face buried into her pillow, howling emitted towards the feathers contained within.

The previous evening's proceedings had completed without further development; Jeremy had simply continued to play his game until Adelaide, perturbed by the lack of his attention, chose to return home, creeping silently through the front door and up the stairs, her father having taken to his bed for the night.

Indeed, she could have made quite a raucous racket, for Peter was, and typically so, thoroughly inebriated. His habit kept in secret from his daughter, the lovesick man would ensconce himself within the dining room, in the name of work, and drink spirits until he could no longer stay conscious; free of his demons, he would then sleep until morning.

This was a daily occurrence.

Although Peter did his best to respect Julia's aspirations, and empathize with her desire to improve the world for the better, he truthfully did not value those irrelevant notions. He was in love -- or had been; heartbroken and betrayed, his emotions cared not about petty rationalizations, but longed only for the companionship of another, specifically the one who had sent him away.

He had pleaded with her; she was insistent. To abandon her project would 'invalidate her', Julia had argued. Her life's work, she must complete it to obtain the satisfaction and 'self-worth' that she

had sought after for such a long time. However, to do this, she would antagonize those who operated outside the restrictive morality of the law, and place them all in danger.

Therefore, Peter and Adelaide must sever their association to her, and depart, not to communicate further with Julia in any fashion until such time as her accomplishments were widely known, and unable to be suppressed by those with whom she fought, the Smiths and others like them. Consequently, a little girl lost her mother, and a devoted husband was abandoned by his wife without any real comprehension of the justification behind such a deplorable decision.

Gig's wheeking persisted, at a lower level, registering his disgruntlement regarding the vacant state of his stomach whilst Adelaide, her pain refusing to subside, took to her feet in an effort to 'walk it off'. To and fro, beside her bed she paced, hoping desperately for her agony to abate, but it did not; soon, she descended the stairs, and impatiently explained an abridged version of her predicament to Peter, the obstinate man expressing some amusement regarding the affair before eventually agreeing to take his daughter to consult a physician.

Ignored, and left alone without benefit of his breakfast, Gig moped about his bedroom habitat, forlorn and miserable. His guardian had seemed to be in considerable distress, and had abruptly departed, without imparting her usual pleasantries; this gravely disturbed the tiny dog, for although brave and bold, he was disadvantaged by stature -- without her aid, he could not survive.

He took to chewing upon his reserve supply of hay; this was not a decision he made lightly, but his anxiety, coupled with a desperately hungry stomach had left no alternatives. Every so often, Gig would pause in his consumption to sound another call of distress; Rumsfeld would bark in troubled reply from his station in the back garden, but no human would appear in response to his pleas.

"Well," Doctor Ormond began optimistically, "the good news is, you didn't break it."

"Doesn't feel like it," grumbled the standing Adelaide, right hand gently massaging her offended posterior. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, quite sure. It is, however, badly bruised and will take some time to heal."

"What am I supposed to do until then?" Adelaide sighed, hopelessly. "I can't stand up forever."

The physician grinned widely, and presented her patient with an oblong, oval piece of foam rubber, hollow in the center, meant as a cushion.

"Great," Adelaide moaned, envisioning the impending ridicule of her classmates, "I'll never hear the end of this one."

"Hey, look at Grandma with her butt-donut," taunted one of her imaginary assailants, noting the cushion's similarity to a popular Canadian snack food. Others questioned Adelaide's eyesight, her teeth and ability to hear before Doctor Ormond certified her fit for school, and returned the girl to her father.

Refusals to utilize the cushion, during the transit to their house so that Adelaide could collect her books -- and her Gig -- ended rather rapidly and she was promptly perched upon it, grudgingly appreciative of the relief it gave. The fears of a grateful dog, named Rumsfeld, were allayed by the return of his human charges, and a guinea pig was given the briefest of opportunities to sample some lettuce before he was stowed away, in his Guardian's jacket, for an afternoon of education.

"What's that for?" questioned Tanya, immediately after spotting Adelaide in the school's corridor.

"I fell," declared Adelaide with finality, indicating that further query was unwelcome.

Tanya ignored the nuance. "On your backside?" she persisted to her glowering acquaintance, mirth slowly growing within her expression.

"Yes, yes, on my backside." An effort was made to change the subject, "How was your date?"

Glee abruptly fell to anger. "Men are dishonourable," Tanya snarled, not precisely using that particular word, but another, a crude synonym for backsides.

"Life hurts," replied the crabby Adelaide, "get a helmet."

"That's a wonderful sentiment," came the joyfully sarcastic retort. "Thank you for such beneficial advice."

"Life sucks; get a blower. Life bites; wear leather --"

"I get the picture. Cheezus," she might have said, if she were Adelaide. "Some friend you are." Tanya stomped off, to find sympathy elsewhere.

Adelaide threw up her hands in exasperation, and carried on to her next class.

Thankfully, but disquietingly, her fellow pupils were far too engaged in gossip regarding the passing of old Mick Hervey to pay much notice of Adelaide's cushion.

"I heard he had a heart attack," said one. "Then he fell, and hit his head, and blood went everywhere, and it was so gross."

"No," objected another, "I was told he was unloading stuff from his truck, and it all fell on top of him, crushing him to death."

Children can be quite macabre.

"You're both wrong," interjected a third. "He was cutting a bag of corn open with his knife, and accidentally sliced his own throat."

"Ew, yuck," came the almost universal response of the class, before an urgent call to order erupted from the instructor, Missus Auburn, unhappy with the current topic of discussion.

"This is Mathematics," she stated dryly, "not 'Tabloid Journalism'. You can make your unsophisticated conjectures on your own time."

She frowned. "This period, however, is mine."

In spite of Cougar's sage advice, the deer's peaceful protest continued, without incident. It appeared that the feline's fears were unfounded; the men retreated, and were not seen for many days. Deer, the dearest of the deer, declared no further need of their intervention, and called off the civil action.

The destruction of the forest by the hand of man was at an end.

Resuming their ordinary existences, the woodland creatures quickly forgot the entire episode -- all of them, that is, except Cougar, who kept a watchful eye on the forest's edge, persuaded that such a formidable monstrosity as humanity would not be so readily overcome. In his mind, there could be no questioning their opponent's return; it was not mere possibility, but absolute certainty.

Eagle, Bear and even the squirrels discarded his convictions as those manufactured by paranoia and hatred; Cougar, they alleged, had always desired to do battle with the humans, after all, and his present insistence was due only to disappointment regarding the contrary outcome.

Indeed, he had stated that quite plainly in the past, and could not refute those assertions. Forced to abandon all hope of assistance, he and fellow cougars would take on the task of patrolling the outskirts alone, whilst the other animals revelled in their delusion of safety, feigning a blissful ignorance of humanity's true nature.

Then, the fire came.

"That is Math, I trust, Adelaide."

"Oh, yes," Adelaide sputtered, "of course it is, Missus Auburn." Annoyed, the girl quickly flipped away from her writing and resumed her assigned task of calculating sums and figuring formulas.

Adelaide hated numbers.

The nine-year old girl broadly declared as much to Mister Hervey, frustrated by her inability to determine the correct measure of oats for Elmore. She was to collect three pounds; however, the cloth bag declared its contents in kilograms.

"Two-point-two pounds to the kilogram," explained Mick, "means that a ten kilogram bag is twenty two pounds."

Uncertain as to how this information pertained to her predicament, the child merely stood and stared at the old man as if he spoke gibberish.

“Therefore,” he continued, undeterred, “you need one seventh of a bag, give or take. So, all you need do is visualize the bag into seven parts, and take away one part.”

The incomprehension failed to abate, and he might as well have been shrieking like a chimpanzee. She sighed, sat, placed her head into her hands, and sulked.

“Maths just aren’t your thing, now are they?” inquired Mister Hervey rhetorically, resting beside his discouraged pupil. A moment passed. “You like words, though, don’t you.”

She nodded.

“Well, what if I told you numbers can change into words.”

Eyebrows rising with curiosity, she peeked through her hands at the old man, intrigued by his statement.

“No,” she said firmly, “letters are letters, and numbers are numbers. Missus Coaldale told me so.”

“Numbers are only a representation of numbers; that is, they’re artificial labels arbitrarily affixed to quantity. They can be whatever you like, even letters.”

Adelaide had no idea what he was taking about, and her frozen expression conveyed that position adequately.

“All right then; there are ten numbers, named zero through nine. This is called a base-10 system. All larger numbers are merely combinations of these.”

“I know that much,” spat the girl, “I’m not four.”

Mick grinned. “Okay, well, there’s twenty-six letters in the alphabet, right?”

She nodded to the affirmative.

“What if they were numbers instead, with Z being zero?”

Nose wrinkled, Adelaide pondered his notion with no small amount of scepticism. Mister Hervey chuckled and, leaving the girl to consider his words, wandered away to assist a customer.

Under the aging Australian's 'system', five plus six would instead be E plus F. Rather than the total adding to eleven, it would sum to K.

$$E + F = K.$$

The juvenile Gig crawled up from inside the child's jacket, and poked his head through the open zipper, at Adelaide's neck. She rubbed his head while her ruminations proceeded.

Gig, the somewhat more elder, similarly stuck his nose through the space under his teenaged guardian's chin and, hunched over her work, hiding the guinea pig from plain view, she stroked his snout gently, pondering a more modern, complex mathematical problem.

Happily, the bell rang, and she was saved from any further drudgery.

That particular class had been the final session on the last day of the school week, Friday. Not only that, but the following Monday was the Canadian customary holiday of 'Thanksgiving', and so the children could look forward to three entire days of freedom.

With the exhilaration that such circumstances encourage, the student body burst forth from their classrooms in celebration. Tanya met Adelaide and Gig in the hallway, and invited the pair along to the diner, so that they all might give thanks for their fortune by partaking in iced dairy confections, and deep-fried potato products.

Coccyx -- the more technical term for your tailbone -- cushion in hand, Adelaide merrily accepted, her mood improving dramatically as a consequence of that proposal; they then marched off towards the town's business district, stomachs and tongues anxiously awaiting their impending satiation.

They sat in a 'booth', two high backed bench seats on either side of a rectangular table, several of these in procession against the wall of the diner.

"So," remarked Tanya, pausing from her recreational consumption to make conversation, "I heard it was a robbery."

"What was?" replied Adelaide, feigning ignorance regarding the subject of her friend's gossip. "What robbery?"

“Old Mick,” Tanya responded, before resuming her quest to pull her remaining beverage through a plastic tube known as a ‘straw’.

Adelaide ‘rolled her eyes’ in a display of disbelief. “Not this again. It was an accident. You’re all crazy.”

“Suit yourself. But that guy was as strong as an ox. And tough. There’s no way he had a heart attack, or fell, or anything. It had to have been ‘foul play’ -- there’s no other explanation.”

“Sometimes people just die, Tanya.”

Recoiling, Tanya grimaced. “Cheezus, we’re morbid, aren’t we. Talk about taking the fun out.”

“I’m sorry, but he was my friend,” retorted Adelaide, “and I don’t find any of this amusing.” Some lettuce from a ‘hamburger’, a hand-held conglomeration of bread, ground beef and assorted vegetables, found its way to a happy guinea pig, clandestinely hidden within a young girl’s jacket.

“Fine then. So,” giggled Tanya, “did you and Jeremy have a little smooch last night?”

Adelaide groaned, and slumped in her seat.

A trim, fit man, eating his meal at the ‘counter’, stationed upon a round, stainless-steel stool waved towards her. That he was of African persuasion encouraged her attention, for such individuals were rarely observed in towns such as Suffield. Not only that, but in his hand was clutched a similar foam ring to that upon which Adelaide was presently positioned.

His bright teeth displayed prominently, he approached the booth.

“It’s not broken, is it?” he pointed towards Adelaide’s backside, some concern contained in his tone. “Mine is,” he continued, gesturing at his own cushion. “Not the greatest.”

She shook her head to the negative, slowly nibbling upon a ‘French fry’, an oil saturated stick of potato.

“Well, that’s excellent news. You be more careful next time.” His voice turned serious. “You really don’t want to fracture your tailbone. You really don’t.”

Adelaide nodded slowly, uncertain as to the quality of the man's sanity.

"Albert," he declared, extending his hand cordially, "Albert Johnson. You can call me AJ."

A long, awkward pause was followed by a tentative response. "Hi."

Tanya kicked Adelaide's shin under the table, and mouthed her insistence that further interaction take place.

Adelaide glowered at her friend, and then offered her own hand to Albert. "Adelaide," she counted, curtly.

"Well, nice to meet you Adelaide," he beamed. "I'll be here for a while, so if you need anything, just let me know. Hope you're feeling better soon."

"So do I," responded the girl nonchalantly. "Well, see you."

AJ returned to his dinner, and Tanya grinned widely. "He's pretty sexy."

Punching Tanya playfully in the shoulder, Adelaide looked quite embarrassed. "And old," she added.

"He's not that old. If this was China or somewhere you could marry him already."

"Quiet, you," Adelaide snarled, softly.

"No, seriously, he's hot."

"If you like him so much, why don't you marry him?"

"Maybe I will. So there."

Adelaide stuck her tongue out.

"Nyah."

"Nyah."

At some point during the previous conversation, Albert Johnson had departed, and discussion diminished to relative silence.

Bidding Tanya adieu, Adelaide and Gig left the diner, and accompanied by Rumsfeld, patiently waiting outside, they made their way home.

Peter was struggling to give life to the dim flames present in the fireplace when his daughter entered. "Hello," he called, between gasps, directing gusts of air toward the feeble combustion. "How was your dinner?"

"Fine," Adelaide shrugged, while standing in the doorway to the living room. "Wet wood?" she queried, regarding her father's difficulties.

"Pretty wet, yeah."

"You could pour gasoline on it."

"Perhaps not," Peter growled, sternly. "And don't you ever do that."

"No worries. I like my eyebrows."

"Glad to hear it."

Adelaide shivered. "Why is it so cold in here?"

"The furnace is out," her father answered. "If I can get this fire going, we'll camp in here. Rumsfeld and Gig too. It might snow tonight, and I don't want you to catch a cold."

"Joy for us," came a sarcastic refrain.

"Oh, come on. Hanging out with the old man isn't that terrible, is it?"

Her feelings on the matter were loudly proclaimed by her silence.

Peter sighed. "You could ease up once in a while. Hey," he exclaimed jubilantly as the flames roared to life, "there we go!"

After stacking some wood against the interior walls of the hearth so that it might dry, he brushed his palms against each other in satisfaction. "Well, at least we're warm."

Restating the obvious: "We are."

"So," Peter began, slumping beside Adelaide on the sofa, "what's up?"

"People at school think Mister Hervey was killed by Osama bin Laden." -- a reference to a well-known insurgent of the day.

"I see."

Rumsfeld sprawled out, in front of the fire.

She turned sharply, and faced her father, agitated. "I'm not kidding."

"Osama bin Laden."

"Well, maybe not. But there's some pretty wild speculation. Jeremy's Dad seems to think it looked suspicious, but couldn't find anything conclusive."

"And so the rumour mill began." Peter winced. "Well, Adelaide, all I can tell you is that Mick's death would be best thought of as an accident. This town is a safe place, and the idea that such violence could occur here is certainly unsettling, but highly unlikely."

He concluded his argument with a resolved "you have nothing to fear," as if perhaps she did, and then only the crackling of the fire was heard for several minutes.

The cougars had done their best to fend off the torch-bearing humans, but they were not subject to immunity-by-decree, and were subsequently shot at long range by snipers, anticipating such action. Quickly, Cougar was forced to order that his troops withdraw into the forest, while the men lit the underbrush ablaze, sending acrid smoke drifting along the ground, deep into the woods.

"Flee!" cried Cougar as he ran to all those who might hear him, "Flee!" Initially stunned by shock, the other creatures soon heeded his call, and joined in the stampede, running away from the smoke and the flames, unwilling to concede that the humans could be responsible, but confronted with the reality that their forest was burning.

Cougar swore that he would have his revenge. Those vile men would not find any fruits in such dastardly labours -- he would

make sure of it. They would build their homes on the smouldering wreckage of the woodland habitat previously host to so many, and Cougar would wait.

Then, vengeance would be his.

“There’s some black guy hanging around,” spouted Adelaide, seemingly spontaneously, and rudely rousing Peter from his pleasant, sleepy trance.

“Yeah,” her father mumbled dozily, “he’s your new Physical Education teacher, or something.”

“He’s kind of creepy.”

“You’re only saying that because he’s black.”

“Possibly,” Adelaide agreed hesitantly, repeating her response. “Possibly.”

Pleased with his daughter’s reason, Peter grunted, and began to snore. “Goodnight, Dad,” said Adelaide softly, sequestering herself and Gig beneath some blankets, settling in for the night.

Albert Johnson. Maybe, she considered, he was a former football player, or basketball star, down on his luck, and forced to become a teacher in Saskatchewan due to gambling, or drug abuse, or avoiding the law.

“They call him ‘The Cleaner’”, said a fictional television announcers voice inside Adelaide’s head, whilst images of professional sport and associated corruption played upon the mental screen contained therein.

AJ. The Cleaner.

She giggled unknowingly, and fell to peaceful slumber with one final, innocent thought.

Maybe she would nickname him Ajax.

CHAPTER SIX:

THE MOUNTAINEER.

ICE CRYSTALS INFESTED EVERY PORE of the old cabin; it was frozen inside and out, but provided a welcome relief to two weary travellers, on the run from those who wanted them dead.

Alistair Dennison wasted little time firing the pot-bellied stove that stood in the center of the cabin, melting ice and snow to water, for reconstituted soup and, more importantly, tea. Some 'trail mix', of dried fruit, nuts and seeds, was offered to his tiny companion, and eagerly accepted by the ravenous creature.

By this point, they had been hiking for five days, with only sporadic, short periods of rest. Alistair would only doze long enough to regain his wits and strength; then, their journey resumed again. This shabby shack would provide his first real chance at obtaining a decent night's sleep, after which he could more adequately determine the logistics involved in completing the trek to the prairies, and the safety of the insignificant settlement of Suffield, Saskatchewan.

Soon, the cabin was warm. Dennison assembled his 'pup-tent', and stowed the weeks-old guinea pig safely inside; then, he unrolled a sleeping bag, laid it out on the wood floor beside the stove, and wriggled inside, with the intention of claiming some well-deserved slumber.

His mind drifted. When Julia had first approached him with her proposal, he had been quite incredulous; the notion that a biological entity could engage in such a complex chemical process internally was absolutely ridiculous. She insisted that he read her paper, but he refused, at least initially.

Thrown carelessly on top of a stack of journals, the report languished for months, while Alistair's scepticism failed to find any decline. It was Exhibit Number One in the trial regarding the lacking validity of his daughter's work, and the crux of his argument that she would best be served by coming into his employ, wherein 'real' scientific research could proceed.

Of course, he merely missed her, and wished for her to relocate so that he might find himself in her company more often. In retrospect, that was a rather selfish mistake, for if he had embraced Julia's concepts earlier, they might have completed their research without the aid of the treacherous William Frankston, and several good people would still be alive.

Alistair's motivation for finally reading his daughter's paper, and consequently abandoning his tenure at the university, are unknown. It would be unfair to speculate -- such an important detail would be done a disservice by idle conjecture. Regardless, he did, and was soon closer to her, in Vancouver, which was, in the end, what he wanted.

Julia's hypotheses were impressive. It required several hours of research on Alistair's part before he grasped the complexity of his daughter's theories, but once he did so, Doctor Dennison was thoroughly convinced of their legitimacy. Humbled, he chose to become her student, and learn precisely how she had come to such advanced conclusions, far beyond the realm of his own abilities.

The danger involved in taking any such work forward was, however, quickly made painfully evident. The team involved with the first project was comprised of only Julia, Alistair and two laboratory assistants, those last having just graduated with Bachelor degrees -- they were gunned down, shot late one night in the motorcar park outside the facility.

This was, in and of itself, not proof that hindering their research was the intended aim, until an e-mail, sent from an anonymous source through a public server, heavily implied that should the Dennisons soldier forth, they might find themselves facing a similar fate.

Obviously, this would not do; a shell corporation was formed, and funding was funnelled through a vast paper trail so as to deter any efforts at deducing their sponsors. False projects were publicly advertised.

Julia would head the true project secretly, communicating only remotely, as 'J'. This, it was hoped, would reduce the potential for external investigation to yield a connection

between her and the laboratory, providing her with virtually complete security.

Although the risk of detection was therefore minimal, it was still not zero, and as such, Julia wanted Peter and Adelaide to leave Vancouver until the project was concluded.

Peter refused.

Despite the joy Alistair felt when in the presence of his granddaughter, and the pleasure he took in schooling Peter in the fine art of mountaineering, he was forced to concur with his daughter.

This became the subject of many alpine summit 'talks' between Peter and Alistair.

"No research is that important," Peter spat angrily, furious over the entire affair. "It's definitely not more important than my family being together, and you can't convince me otherwise."

Alistair would concede that he could not.

"You must make a sacrifice. I understand that; I have a great fondness for Adelaide, and I certainly do not want to see her go, but I'm willing to make that sacrifice for the sake of the 'greater good'."

"And you won't tell me what that is."

"No," Alistair sighed, "I cannot; the less you know the better. You simply have to trust the judgement of your wife and your father-in-law that what we're doing has the potential to impact upon the lives of all humanity. Isn't that enough?"

Like a spoiled child: "It's not fair."

"No," said reassuringly, "it's not. But, anything worth doing tends to require at least a certain amount of injustice. After all," he smiled wryly, quoting an old axiom, "no pain, no gain'."

This was to be their last discussion on the topic.

An unknown assailant attempted to force entry into Julia and Peter's apartment the following evening, likely an effort at robbery by a drug-addicted hooligan, but it was enough. Arguments were made, and positions declared.

She made her choice; he made his.

Infuriated by his wife's decision to remain with the project, Peter pronounced them separated, and thus he would take Adelaide and leave, as per Julia's request, but not honouring it. He would depart out of anger and spite, with no regard to the benefits of her research, emotionally distancing himself from one that he loved so that he might protect another.

Consoling Julia, Alistair noted that although their separation had been painful, Peter and Adelaide were out of danger, and their work could continue with conscience clear.

It was a very small comfort.

Unable to sleep, he opened his eyes, and stared upward, at the far wall to spy a shelf laden with slightly rusted cans. A muted celebration took place in his heart; an extended stay in the cabin would be possible, and he could better determine if he had indeed mislaid his pursuers by merely waiting for their attendance.

Meanwhile, the intervening time would be put to use practicing the sharp Australian accent of his youth, regaining the colloquialisms and habits that would distance him from the prim, proper image of Doctor Alistair Dennison, instead reflecting the rural heritage of Mick Hervey, the recent purchaser of a 'feed and supply' store in Suffield, Saskatchewan.

Julia had furtively requested that her father attend her, on that fated evening less than a week before, urgently but unspecific. He had gone, of course, meeting his daughter on the 'SkyTrain', an elevated, mass-transit system that ferried commuters back and forth across the Vancouver metropolitan area; simply two unrelated passengers, they held a coded discussion about current events and the weather that adequately conveyed to Alistair that William Frankston was not who he appeared to be.

The little guinea pig, who had been impulsively and spontaneously removed from the laboratory by his present caretaker only the night before his family tree was so brutally uprooted, wheeled quietly from his tent, registering a general complaint, regarding recent circumstances, with the universe at large.

Alistair chuckled. "I apologize for the inconveniences posed by your substandard transportation and accommodation, your highness; however, I do suspect that you would have found the alternative even less to your liking."

A single wheel, louder, came in response followed only by an almost barely-audible murmuring, the cavy apparently conceding to his guardian's ghastly speculation. Alistair smiled. "Don't worry, little fellow, you'll have a nice, happy home soon. I know a certain little girl who will take quite a shine to you. You'll see."

It can be reasonably assumed that, had the guinea pig understood the man, he hoped this was to be revealed as truth -- and soon.

William Frankston was a fraud. Julia had meticulously scrutinized his education, prior accomplishments and references, but had only found them to be impeccable, flawless. Perhaps, in retrospect, that perfection ought to have raised suspicion; sadly, they had been desperately eager to employ his services, and embraced that deception without further question.

A casual discussion with a colleague, a former researcher at one of Frankston's earlier employers, had prompted an offhand remark regarding the character of the fellow, one met with surprise and confusion.

You see, William Frankston was dead.

Julia's associate had attended the funeral herself. There had been an unfortunate automobile accident two years earlier, and the man was slain in consequence. It had been a terrible affair.

Julia objected, but she was quite insistent. There was no mistake -- if someone was claiming to be Frankston, he must be an impostor.

Looking more deeply into the waters of William's past showed only an inky blackness that chilled Julia's heart. She would alert her father straight away, taking him from the festivities celebrating their success, and saving his life as a result.

In the modern era, her timing, regarding that incident, has been considered, by some, to be inexcusably contrived.

I must be clear: those conspiracy theorists only do a disservice to history, and these terrible accusations must cease. There is no evidence that Julia Dennison was ever, in any way, directly involved with the Smiths, William Frankston, or any other aggressor.

This idea that, out of guilt, Julia had, at the last minute, yielded to her feelings for her father, and spared him from death at the hands of her collaborator, Frankston, is nonsense. To complete her work, she had surrendered her family, husband and daughter; it is ludicrous to suggest that, for the sake of financial gain, she would be personally involved in the destruction of that which she held so dear.

Rumours that the Smiths had located Peter and Adelaide, and were thus 'blackmailing' Julia are equally baseless, and have no foundation in reality. Indeed, history shows no indication that the Smiths were ever aware of Julia's estranged family, let alone cognizant of their location. Had they have been, events would have most certainly unfolded in a differing, ruinous fashion.

Therefore, no more ink will be wasted on this preposterous conjecture.

Striving to hold his emotion in check, Alistair had said an impersonal farewell to the stranger on the train, that woman fighting her own battle to retain control over her tears, and then he placed a telephone call to the man whose agenda it was to murder them all, and raze what remained to the ground.

Despite William's best efforts to convince his superior that circumstances were not as he imagined them to be, those appalling visions were instead confirmed, and Doctor Dennison ran, back to his home to collect what he rightly assumed to be the last living specimen of his work, his hiking gear and little else.

He 'pushed the button', erasing all traces of his own life from computers, telephones and other electronic devices, and then fled. A safe gamble that major transportation routes would be monitored, he chose to frustrate efforts to capture him by taking to the less-trodden country lanes, traversing dense woods, and climbing rocky terrain.

Without any assistance from navigation satellites, radio or any other conveniences of that age, Alistair made his way out of the

Vancouver metropolitan area, then travelling north-east, hidden by the trees of the coastal mountains, avoiding rivers and fields where he might be spied upon from so fantastically high above.

Kilometres traversed soon numbered in the double, then triple digits. Only pausing occasionally to fend off complete exhaustion, the man would march, as if at the point of a rifle, day and night until the landscape was inconsequential and his memory nothing but a blur.

Like a robotic contraption, his thoughts consisted only of moving forward, away from an enemy he could no longer recall in any detail, towards a sanctuary equally vague in description. He was hungry, starving, saving his rations for his companion, the only remaining example of their remarkable scientific breakthrough, delirious and incoherent.

Then, he had found the cabin.

An abandoned logging camp, road overgrown and shrouded by tall trees laden with snow, sparked enough interest within Alistair's addled mind to warrant investigation by his more advanced faculties, and he emerged from his waking coma to be confronted by his salvation.

His pained stomach aware of the cache of canned goods, it would not permit him rest until satiated; the man cast off his sleeping bag, and arose to find sustenance. A tin of kidney beans, heated on the pot-bellied stove, soon satisfied his requirements, and he would finally be allowed his well-earned slumber, albeit in a land of nightmares, of violence and death.

Two weeks would pass, and nothing would disturb the wintry solace of Alistair Dennison, soon to be known as Mick Hervey. A beard and a moustache graced his formerly clean-shaven features, his Australian accent was distinctly so; it was deemed the correct moment to carry on, and they did, the guinea pig nestled once again inside his clothing, safe from the cruel elements that would endeavour to freeze him solid, if granted the opportunity.

Then came the cliff.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

FRIENDS AND NEIGHBOURS.

GIG HAPPILY CHEWING AWAY ON ADELAIDE'S HAIR, she awoke to the dim light of early dawn, her breath visible in the icy air, the fire having long since expired.

There was a noise.

Rumsfeld, still lying where he had retired the night before, cocked an ear, before opening his eyes, and raising his head in response to the mysterious disturbance. Adelaide arose, while Gig remained nestled within her hair, and moved, with the dog, to investigate.

It had come from the basement.

The door to the stairwell that led below was in the kitchen, and they proceeded into that naturally refrigerated icebox promptly.

Someone was ascending the stairs.

Confused, Rumsfeld growled; he did not know who the intruder was, but was hesitant to mount a blind attack against them. A vague feeling of recognition mounted in his stomach, and forced him to stay his proverbial hand.

Adelaide was not so cautious.

Quickly arming herself with a skillet, she abruptly thrust open the door, and swung her weapon towards the trespasser with as much might as she could muster.

"Jumping Jehasophat!" Jeremy did not precisely shout as he blocked Adelaide's assault with his forearms, and prevented egregious injury to his head. "Are you insane?"

"Am I insane?" Adelaide retorted angrily, "You're the one prowling around unannounced. Be happy we don't own a rifle."

"That might have been safer. You're probably a better shot with the skillet."

She raised the pan again.

"Okay, okay!" Jeremy backed away. "Chill out, already."

"So, why were you in our basement?"

"Saw your furnace was out. Thought I could get it going again."

"And did you?"

Jeremy shrugged, and subsequently meandered past the girl, towards the thermostat stationed upon the kitchen wall. He flipped it off, then back on, and the furnace roared to action, much to his visible satisfaction.

"I guess the answer to that is yes."

"Smart aleck," snapped Adelaide, annoyed but relieved.

"You're welcome," said Jeremy flippantly, in response to his friend's brusque expression of gratitude.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Sure, that'd be great."

While Adelaide prepared the brew, potent in caffeine, made from a ground South American bean, Jeremy sat down at the table and patted Rumsfeld, the dog eager for the rougher attention a teenaged boy could provide.

Gig, meanwhile, sat in his kitchen 'house', dining upon a breakfast of carrot slices and celery leaves; the latter was one of his all-time favourites. There was, otherwise, silence.

"Howdy neighbour," the policeman greeted Peter Pemberton, and his young daughter Adelaide, as they emerged from their motorcar, in the driveway of their home in Suffield, Saskatchewan, for the first time. "Name's Joe, Joe Henderson. I live next door."

"Nice to meet you," replied Peter jovially, while his daughter, visibly upset, merely stared down towards her boots, and

the snow-dusted concrete. "Well," he said, turning to stare at his new home, "it sure looks nice."

"It's cold," said Adelaide, with equal frigidity.

She was ignored, or perhaps not. "Yep, sure is," agreed Joe, with either or both comments. "Where you from?"

Almost in unison: "Vancouver."

"Guess you'll just have to get used to it. The cold, I mean. The house is pretty comfortable."

A few moments passed.

"Well," continued Joe, "I'm the local RCMP constable, so if you need anything, here I am." Another pause. "Say, would you like to come around for the community Thanksgiving dinner, on Monday? We'll have plenty of turkey, and fixings; Adelaide can meet my son, Jeremy."

"That sounds wonderful," grinned Peter, shaking Joe's hand.

"Yeah, just wonderful," grumbled Adelaide. "Eating with strangers."

"Rough life, huh?" said Joe, cordially, to the young girl.

"You don't know the half of it."

"Anyway," bubbled Peter, as he led Joe away from the ticking time bomb that was his daughter, "we'll see you on Monday, then. Nice to meet you!"

"Here's your coffee," said Adelaide, depositing the ceramic mug of steaming hot liquid in front of her impromptu heating mechanic. "Just the way you like it. Mud."

"Thanks. Hey, sorry I wasn't much fun the other night. Just with old Mick and all --"

"I know. Hey, where were you yesterday?"

"Is that coffee I smell?" queried a waking Peter from the front room. The teenagers answered back in the affirmative, and the man, his hair a tussled clutter, staggered in shortly thereafter, in search of his own dose of stimulants.

"Jeremy, you've got the magic touch," Peter grinned appreciatively at the boy responsible for the warmth presently filling the house. "She just won't start for me."

"You had a thick layer of crud on your glow plug. Won't start if it can't fire."

"Sage advice." Peter slurped his coffee. "So, going to Thanksgiving dinner again this year?"

The Suffield Town Hall bustled with the town's residents, all assembled for the annual collective feast. Peter looked about anxiously for the familiar face of Joe and, finding his new neighbour, waved to garner his attention.

Joe walked over, with a small boy in tow, similar in age to Adelaide. "Happy Thanksgiving there, Pembertons," greeted the policeman. "This here's my boy Jeremy."

"Say hello to Jeremy, Adelaide," urged Peter of his daughter.

"Hello to Jeremy."

"Hey," said Jeremy, shuffling his feet.

"Well then, let's eat; shall we?"

"Food is good," declared Jeremy with a poignant certainty, but cavalier indifference.

That comprised the notable sum-total of the Pembertons' first Thanksgiving in Suffield.

"And every year," replied the present-day Jeremy, with a very weak enthusiasm. "Won't be the same without old Mick though."

Peter sighed. "No, it won't."

That was the second Thanksgiving.

He had appeared then, Mick Hervey, as if from nowhere, boisterously engaging in raucous conversation with all the townspeople he could manage. An immigrant from Australia, he was the latest owner of Suffield's feed and supply store -- this was surprising, since none of the residents seemed to have known that it had been put up for sale.

Nevertheless, his ‘ocker’ charms could not be resisted, and he proved to be an instant success in all the local social circles; especially when it came to the annual Thanksgiving dinner, where he rapidly became known as the ‘life of that party’.

In recent years, he had attended with Missus Greensborough, the grocer, the pair having become quite close, and they would lead the celebrations, making a toast to continued prosperity, and expressing the town’s collective gratefulness for affluence past.

Sadly, this year would hold quite the quiet Thanksgiving dinner indeed.

Peter shattered the sombre silence. “Well, Adelaide, you have a horse to tend to.”

“I should get going too,” said Jeremy, standing up. “Well, thanks for the coffee.”

“Anytime,” smiled Peter, cheerily. He saw the young man out.

It would be a bit of a larger chore seeing to Elmore that day, for the Feed and Supply was obviously closed, and so, the Pembertons, Gig and Rumsfeld accompanying them, would need to travel for over an hour, to the next nearest town, in order to obtain their allotted contribution of the horse’s grain, and hay.

This time would be spent in meditation.

Adelaide would think about old Mister Hervey, and contemplate greatly upon just how strange it seemed to her that she felt so little sorrow for the passing of a man for whom she held such grand affections. Instead, only a rising anger, originating from deep within her heart, cried out for vengeance with progressively increasing volume.

A veritable army of hatred, it was swiftly advancing, nearing the surface of her subconscious at a quick march, but this looming darkness had not yet visibly changed the bleak, snow-covered landscape of her present detached demeanour.

Logically, she ought to be gravely concerned by that impending, dangerously derisive development; however, the girl was unable to find the emotional wherewithal required to care, and

could only stare blankly from the motorcar's window, as if she were a deer, caught in the headlamp of an oncoming train, aware of the approaching calamity, but unable to mount any effectual response.

Peter was, himself, greatly worried by his daughter's lack of outward grief, and he, too, could hear those drums of war, rising up from within his child, heralding a forthcoming disaster, but there was little he could do. She was absent, distant and unreceptive to any constructive dialogue regarding the subject.

Adelaide's journal pages, during that time, reflected this reality with their emptiness.

Rumsfeld, unaware as to the true root of his humans' troubles, was bothered by their unexpected change in routine. Although pleased to have encountered Jeremy earlier that morning, the long detour that followed had shortly squelched the dog's happy mood, and set him instead upon a course of concern.

Similarly, although conversely, Gig was put off not by the diversion, but rather, by the unusually rapid heartbeat that he heard thumping away within his guardian, a sign of stress and an indicator that she was preparing to either fight, or flee -- neither of which the guinea pig wished to have any part of, content with his serene existence to remain the way that it had been for all of his adult life, after the turbulence of his youth.

Even Elmore, when the Pemberton troupe had made its eventual appearance, easily sensed that something was distinctly wrong. The conversation that the young Adelaide habitually engaged in with the horse did not occur that day. Instead, she brushed him in silence, and opted not to ride him, merely leading him about the wintry, whitened paddock by his tether, while Peter and Rumsfeld looked on from the other side of the fence, with Gig secure in the motorcar.

Gig wheeled in dismay, but no one could hear him.

Her behaviour, Adelaide claimed, was due to her bruised tailbone, but Peter was not convinced. His suspicions notwithstanding, with his daughter's equine chores having been completed, they returned to their home in Suffield, where Gig's many 'houses' would then receive their regular weekly housekeeping services -- with precious little cheer on the part of the staff.

Needless to say, he did not tip.

Saturday afternoon, and then evening were passed upstairs, in Adelaide's room, with the guinea pig idly processing a mound of hay while his caretaker lay on her bed, coccyx cushion firmly underneath the girl's backside, mindlessly staring up at the ceiling, once again studying the covered opening into the attic above, without achieving the required initiative to actually explore it, as she never had.

A rock rapped the window.

"Hey," called Jeremy, from the frozen ground below. "Is your cell phone off?"

"I probably forgot to charge it," Adelaide replied. "What do you want?"

"I don't know," said the eight year-old Jeremy. "I could show you the river."

"Okay," replied the seven year-old Adelaide. "If my Dad says it's okay, I guess."

He did.

The only condition was that the child 'dress for the elements'; this meant several layers of clothing, scarves, toques and gloves -- by the time her father was finished 'bundling her up', the poor girl was almost as wide as she was tall.

Snaking it's way along the edge of town, not far from Adelaide's present lodgings, was the aptly named Serpentine River. A slow-running tributary, it was perpetually muddy; the locals would commonly joke that it 'flowed upside down'. Lined with deciduous trees on either side, the banks were covered in discarded leaves; a slight covering of snow made for a beautiful transitional scene, from fall to winter, of yellow, orange and white.

The pair walked along there, quietly, awkward shyness stymieing any attempts at dialogue, until Jeremy mustered up enough courage to advance the obvious opening question:

"So, what's it like in Vancouver?"

Surprised by such bold action, Adelaide was scarcely able to stammer out a one-word response. "Warm", she blurted.

“Warm,” Jeremy echoed, carefully ruminating upon that remarkably concise answer.

“Wet,” appended Adelaide, her facility for speech appearing to gradually improve.

“Warm, and wet,” revised Jeremy, nodding his head with sagacious understanding. “Cool.”

“No, not cool,” Adelaide shivered. “Warm, and wet.”

They laughed, and, their collective anxiety consequently calmed, ran through the leaves with abandon, frolicking upon the riverbank the way that children do.

This was the first happiness that Adelaide had felt in quite some time.

Jeremy had no mother, either; she had died from some manner of illness, a complication of his birth. Rather than taking to resentment the way some fathers do in such tragic circumstances, Joe had instead bestowed the deep love he had felt for his wife upon his son, and they were very close.

Adelaide, on the other hand, had a somewhat differing situation, one that she related to Jeremy at great length, to which he responded with some simple empathy.

“Bummer,” he said.

Although less than comprehensive, his sentiment was appreciated, and they sat down, upon a log, beside the river, throwing small pebbles into it and marvelling at the resultant ripples, until their respective fathers came, and took them home.

“You want to come ‘hang out’?” asked the somewhat deeper voice of the adolescent Jeremy, to Adelaide, head emerging from her bedroom window.

She considered. “No, not tonight. I’m just not in a very good mood.” He looked crestfallen, and turned to move away. “Hold on a minute.” Jeremy stopped. “Where were you, yesterday, anyway?”

Visibly apprehensive, he weighed his response carefully. “I was helping my Dad. Over at the Feed and Supply.”

It was then Adelaide's turn to ponder just exactly how much additional detail she desired to learn regarding that revelation, to which she decided firmly upon none.

"Ah. Okay. Good night then."

Jeremy sighed with relief. "G'night," he contracted, and then trundled off.

Adelaide returned inside, to resume her vigil upon the mattress, whilst Gig mindlessly consumed his hay, and wasted time passed.

Meanwhile, Peter sat in the dining room that served as his study, staring at his memories, and drinking his spirits, trying to numb his feelings, and cast off his consciousness for oblivion.

It was not working.

Oddly, recent events were of little direct consequence to Peter's insomnia; the bulk of his restlessness was instead related to the difficulties his daughter appeared to be having resolving her emotions surrounding the incident. Their relationship was tenuous at best; the last thing Peter needed was for her to drift farther away from him.

Selfishly, he cursed Mick for having the obstinacy to die.

"You'd be doing me quite the favour, taking care of that guinea pig," said Mick, taking Peter aside while Adelaide patted and cooed at the little creature.

Peter grimaced. "She's already got a dog, and the horse --"

"Well, I'll tell you what, I'll give you all you need for the dog, the horse, and the guinea pig."

"For how long?"

"Forever."

"That must be some guinea pig."

"Ah, you could say he's a good friend. We've been through a lot together."

"Isn't he about three months old?"

"It's been an interesting three months."

"I bet."

The old Australian's statements had been rooted in all sorts of truth.

Peter took another stiff drink, and glanced down at the letter on the table, the one informing him that the late Mick Hervey had bequeathed his Feed and Supply store to one Peter Pemberton.

Mick had clearly intended to keep his promise of providing perpetual provisions for Adelaide's trio, for he had demonstrated that admirably post-mortem.

This was, however, dependent on Mick's cause of death being declared an accident, or natural causes -- and Joe was frustratingly reluctant to certify it as either.

Even then, Peter had few notions as to precisely what he would do with the store after he finally received title to it. He already had his own business, and it was quite lucrative, likely more so than the Feed and Supply. To abandon one in favour of the other made little economic sense.

Frankly, it was an easy decision, for him, but if Adelaide knew, she would insist that they retain the store, regardless of financial loss. This would not go well, since Peter was not liable to surrender to such sentimentality.

He took another drink.

Despite good intentions, this development spelled nothing but trouble for Peter Pemberton.

He ought to have said no.

"Well, how can I refuse such a generous offer, then?" Peter turned, to face his daughter. "Okay, you can keep it."

Mick Hervey smiled, satisfied.

"Him!" Adelaide corrected her father sternly, "He's a he!"

"And what's his name, then?" Peter grinned.

"Gig," she stated decisively.

“Hey, I played a few of those.” This was an attempt at a pun; ‘gig’ was a vernacular term for a musical performance.

The young girl failed to comprehend him, and looked confused.

“Oh, never mind.” He raised an imaginary glass to toast. “To Gig.”

“To Gig,” agreed Mick.

Outside the memory, Peter refilled his rather real glass with another round of liquor, and joined in.

He sighed. “To Gig,” he cheered soberly, and then emptied the tumbler, in a continuing effort to become less so.

This would eventually prove successful.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

THANKSGIVING MISGIVINGS.

SUNDAY WAS COMPLETELY UNEVENTFUL.

The *Encyclopaedia Chronologica* has no entry for this date. Adelaide's journal is similarly silent. To both, it is as if that day never existed. Only weather records, indicating that it snowed lightly in Suffield, Saskatchewan, and the daytime maximum temperature was minus five degrees Centigrade, verify that Saturday did not merely advance straight to Monday, with Sunday overlooked.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" screeched Eagle, joyously, to those on the ground below.

"And we ought to give thanks for what?" grumbled Bear, "The destruction of our home?"

"The death of our friends, of our family?" joined in Deer, many of his relations having been lost to the fire.

A chorus subsequently erupted, all adverse to Eagle's call for celebration.

"Now, now," cried the bird from his tree, attempting to calm their discontent, "at least we are alive, and fed. We have met new friends, and have a new home. These are things for which we should give thanks, should we not?"

"How about 'not'," snarled Cougar, a seething rage marked in his voice.

"Why did the Spirits allow this to happen?" questioned a squirrel, reigniting the debate, and spawning a tornado of like-minded metaphysical queries. "Do the Spirits favour the humans?" asked one; "Are they punishing us?" wondered another.

"No!" Eagle shouted, "The Spirits have certainly not forsaken us. But, how are we to understand their intentions? 'Ours is not to reason why' --"

“Ours is but to take revenge,” finished Cougar evilly, placing his own particular slant upon that timeworn phrase.

“I’d give thanks for that,” said Chipmunk, her mate having been caught in the blaze, and suffocated by the smoke. “Those humans should get what they deserve.”

“What they deserve!” the forest animals chanted in unison, all craving swift vengeance for their grievances.

Cougar seized upon the opportunity.

“They took our lives; we should take theirs,” he rumbled. “An eye for an eye.”

“Hold on just one moment, Cougar,” interjected Eagle, visibly flustered. “You can’t possibly be suggesting --”

“Eye for an eye!” chanted the woodland creatures.

“Please --” -- desperately.

Cougar laughed, with a grim mirth.

Panicked, Eagle wheeled.

The forest animals immediately ceased their call to arms, and directed their puzzled gaze towards the equally confused Eagle.

Eagle wheeled again.

“Murfmuruf,” mumbled Adelaide, “pig!” Poking her nose from beneath her thick layer of woollen blankets, Jack Frost bit at it, and it was consequently determined that the central heating system had malfunctioned once again.

This was no encouragement with which to emerge from one’s snug swaddle.

However, on the cold was carried a familiar smell, that of flour, egg and milk, beaten together into a thin, but not watery mixture, then fried with butter in a cast-iron skillet. These ‘pancakes’ were once a weekly tradition for the Pembertons, but had of late become a less-often occurrence.

Slowly returning to reality, Adelaide began to make out the voices of both her father, Peter, and Jeremy, evidently present to once again resurrect their ailing furnace. She would slowly rise

from her bed, and retrieve Gig from his quarters whilst the males conversed over mugs of coffee in the kitchen beneath.

“Well, it looks like the jets have worn open too much, and they’re spraying oil all over the place, fouling the plugs.”

Peter nodded in response to Jeremy’s diagnosis. “Easy to fix?”

“Yeah, if we had the parts. But, it’s Thanksgiving, so that could be a bit of a problem.”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

Jeremy rubbed Rumsfeld’s head. “We have some wood you could use, for today, if you want. Tomorrow, I’ll skip the morning, and do the repair.”

“I don’t want to encourage your truancy,” Peter started to object.

“Well, tough. I won’t have any neighbour of mine freezing to death.” Jeremy was quite stern; that was that.

Coccyx cushion in hand, and Gig huddling closely for warmth, Adelaide quietly descended the stairs.

“So,” began Peter, after a few moments silence, “have you heard anything new from your father, regarding you-know-what?”

“No,” drawled Jeremy lengthily, the pitch of his voice falling as if a slide-whistle. He looked curiously contemplative. “Have you told Adelaide yet?”

“Has he told me what,” said the girl, her entry previously unnoticed by those others present. Tail wagging, Rumsfeld trotted over to greet her.

Peter stammered. “I, uh -- well, Adelaide, um --”

Adelaide’s brow promptly furrowed with concern.

“I’m playing hockey today,” declared Jeremy proudly. “That’s what.”

Grateful for his reprieve, Peter wordlessly excused himself, and flipped a pancake.

“Oh,” said Adelaide, returning to her regular expression.

“I’d like it if you came.”

Casually, the girl agreed. “It won’t be any colder out there than it already is in here.”

“Probably not.”

They all sat, then, around the kitchen table, and ate their breakfast, covering the pancakes with syrup derived from the maple tree, orange marmalade and butter. There was little further conversation while they chewed contentedly. Rumsfeld was the beneficiary of many a scrap, and Gig had his own ‘special treat’, a thick slice of cucumber -- he took to it voraciously.

All was well, that Thanksgiving morning, at least then.

The constant rain, having fallen for days, veiled the ground and the water past with a thick mist. Thomas O’Malley sat in the window, and peered beyond, between the water droplets that populated its exterior surface, while Adelaide played with her toys beside him, on the floor, and Peter fried pancakes on the apartment’s small electric stove.

There was no snow outside, it was not terribly cold, and the grass, although sodden with moisture, was green. It would make a sucking sound if you walked upon it, and the wet earth would cover you from head to toe, if you let it.

Adelaide was fond of that.

It was Thanksgiving Day in Vancouver, and they would have their traditional breakfast; sadly, Julia would be absent for the first, but not the last time. This discrepancy was not lost on the young girl, who would merely pick at her food, eating very little, disappointed by her mother’s lack of attendance, although not devastated.

She had Thomas O’Malley, the window, the rain, and the mud. For these she was thankful.

Unfortunately, in a little less than one year, that would all be taken away from her.

They finished their breakfast, Adelaide, Peter and Jeremy; plates were collected, and perishables stowed away. The men,

young and older, set upon the task of retrieving the necessary firewood from the Henderson residence, so that the Pemberton's abode would be warmed later that evening, whilst Adelaide washed up the dishes, and carefully wiped the cast-iron pan that she considered to be her most precious heirloom.

Manual labour completed, Jeremy would invite Gig, Rumsfeld, Adelaide and Peter to pass the intervening time, before the hockey match, at his house; they would agree, and subsequently spend the next few hours hearing of Joe's noble exploits as a member of the brave Royal Canadian Mounted Police, while the man consumed copious quantities of an alcoholic beverage known as 'beer', a product manufactured from barley and hops, popular with prairie Canadian inhabitants.

Peter, with little urging, would join him with his libations; Joe would not, however, speak of Mick Hervey -- this mildly annoyed the elder Pemberton.

The Suffield Sasquatch, named after a mythical, man-like beast rumoured to reside, ironically, in far more forested regions of western Canada, were to 'face off' against the Birmingham, Manitoba Buffalo; the visiting American team would partake of the community Thanksgiving meal following the event, celebrating the holiday over one month earlier than their countrymen.

Jeremy was the captain of his squad, and therefore, he would make decisions regarding the Sasquatches' activities while they were on the ice, and consequently out of communication with their coach, Mister Fibbroni, a short, stout Italian with a sharp tongue, and a quick temper.

The captain was excited, for a 'scout' would be present at the game that day, an agent of a larger, 'professional' hockey franchise in which players of the game were remunerated for their stick-wielding services. The young man hoped desperately that higher notice would be paid of his talents, and he would subsequently be contracted, securing his future.

This was, of course, a highly unlikely possibility, but that truth failed to deter his enthusiasm, as it tends not to do with those who seek fortune and fame.

As the day wore on, Adelaide would grow weary of hearing from one Henderson, and then from the other; mercifully, the time

finally arrived at which they would all depart for the ice arena, to witness the spectacle that was 'junior-league hockey'.

A rubber disk, known as a 'puck', was the focal point for this particular pastime. The object was to use an L-shaped stick to deposit this item into your opponent's net, stationed at the edge of the oval-shaped rink, opposite to you. Each team would field six members: one net-defender known as a 'goalie', two defensemen, and three 'forwards', the aggressors.

Due to the fast-paced nature of the game, players would individually retire, and be replaced at set intervals -- except for the goalkeeper, who would typically tend his net for the entire duration.

This was a very physically confrontational sport, where both accidental and intentional injury occurred commonly. It was frequently argued that this savagery was an integral part of the exercise; however, it is hard to understand the need for it on the face of the rules. Nevertheless, the populace of the day appears to have had an overwhelming thirst for blood, and these sorts of spectacles served to satisfy this desire to witness such violence.

The talent scout was there, so too reporters from the local and regional presses. It seemed as if the entire town was in attendance, and many of those from surrounding farms as well. The stands were full to capacity; busy vendors hurried about selling hot drinks and snacks.

Peter, Adelaide and Joe found places to sit, while Jeremy sat down beside the ice, and laced on his skates, then prepared to do battle.

There was a change.

Mister Fibbroni was deathly ill with some sort of seasonal virus, and as a result, there would be a different coach that day. Someone truly novel would take over the reins of the Sasquatch junior hockey organization, at least temporarily.

The new man in charge was one Albert Johnson.

Rumsfeld, in the stands with his charges, growled quietly when the man appeared, and Gig, his intuitive sense warning him that he ought to make himself scarce, burrowed as deeply into Adelaide's inside jacket pocket as he could.

A discussion took place, one at times quite heated, between Jeremy and Mister Johnson. It was clear to Adelaide that they failed to agree on a number of key points regarding strategy, and no resolution to those impasses had occurred by the point that the referee insisted the game commence.

This did not bode well for the home team's performance.

Indeed, without cohesion between coach and captain, the Buffalo had an easy time finding weaknesses, and exploiting them -- this did nothing to endear Jeremy in the eyes of the talent scout; that the young man was publicly argumentative towards his substitute superior at every opportunity certainly did not aid in his cause, either.

Two hours later, the game was finished, and the Sasquatch were thoroughly humiliated.

Jeremy was livid.

He blamed Albert Johnson.

The town itself showed remarkable understanding, and held no malice towards Johnson for their team's defeat -- after all, he had been called at the last moment. Coach Fibbroni had sworn to lead the team at all costs; regardless, his inability to rise from his bed had frustrated that bold intent, and a replacement had to be found quickly. The new Physical Education teacher was an obvious candidate.

Jeremy was not so compassionate. His dreams had been smashed against a rock, and all hope had drained from them, down the nearest storm-sewer grate. The scout would not return until the following Thanksgiving, and this was, for the teenager, an interminable amount of time. As far as he was concerned, his career in hockey was finished.

When the horn sounded to signal the conclusion of the fated exhibition, he threw his helmet and gloves down on the ice in a sign of contempt, launched a barrage of expletives in Albert Johnson's direction, and stomped away.

He would not say a word for the remainder of the afternoon.

Joe called upon the Pemberton's altruism to persuade them to assist with the dinner preparations, at the community hall.

Adelaide, her feelings still masked concerning the death of Mick Hervey, grudgingly agreed, and soon, she found herself peeling vast quantities of potato, to be boiled, then mashed, smothered in gravy and consumed by the masses.

The aggrieved former hockey player took to bouncing said potatoes off of the wall, over, and over again.

“Would you cut that out?” barked Adelaide, after his distracting hobby had gone on for several minutes. He declined to honour her request, and continued his disruptive behaviour.

“Fine,” she sighed, “be a big baby, see if I care.”

He glowered angrily.

Adelaide returned his expression in kind, and the ‘boy’ -- one well and truly -- went to find his sympathy elsewhere.

“He’ll get over it,” called Peter, over the rattle and clang of pots and pans. His daughter nodded, but was unconvinced. She had never seen Jeremy so incensed before, and had a poor feeling the evening’s programme might hold additional, unexpected entertainment.

Turkeys, several in fact, had been stuffed, in the cavities formerly occupied by the birds’ internal organs, with a mixture of bread, and aforementioned giblets. There were also various vegetables: carrots, turnip and peas, as well as a sauce made of cranberries, sweetened and jellied.

This, along with the mashed potatoes and gravy, comprised the feast.

The guests began to arrive just as the sun had entirely exited the day, subdued and sombre, saddened by the passing of Mick Hervey. This was, in a way, to be his ‘wake’; thanks would be given for the short time the town had been graced by the valued man’s presence, but little else.

It was so, and Adelaide was pleased to see such high esteem granted to one she cared for a great deal.

Then, Albert Johnson arrived.

He had not known Mick Hervey, nor was he aware of what large part the Australian had played in previous festivities. As a

result, Albert ran counter to the underlying mood, and was instead jovial, jolly.

Much to Adelaide's exasperation, his gaiety was contagious.

Johnson was humble, and self-deprecating. He made a toast, wherein he apologised profusely for his incompetence, and humorously begged not to be torched at the stake for his failings. His audience responded favourably to his comedic routine, and the next thing Adelaide knew, the atmosphere of reverence had evaporated, to be replaced by boisterous, disrespectful merrymaking.

She was not amused.

Neither was Missus Greensborough, who made only the briefest of appearances. After concluding her meal, she shot a glance of accusation at Peter Pemberton, and then departed. The man looked genuinely bewildered, and little more was thought of it. Mick Hervey's de facto widow, it was widely understood that, in recent days, the woman had become somewhat unhinged.

Adelaide stepped outside, to momentarily free herself from the grip of the crafty 'Ajax', and found Jeremy sitting on the step patting Rumsfeld, in the cold, but still smouldering.

"Well," she said, "I can't say that I'm very fond of him either."

Jeremy nodded, and finally spoke. "Looks like he's got a pretty large fan club, though."

"Yeah, well, you know people around here. Fickle."

He grinned. There was some hope in that statement.

There was contentment there, for a few precious seconds. Then, Albert, in his infinite wisdom, chose to venture outside, and usher the wayward youths in. Rumsfeld growled.

Jeremy, as you might imagine, did not take this well.

In clear view of those present -- most of the town, the Birmingham Buffalo, and so on -- he punched 'Coach Johnson' in the nose. It broke, presumably, and, thinned by alcohol, blood flowed freely.

Tanya, accompanying her chronically inebriated mother, laughed.

His son embarrassingly having committed a violent crime in front of dozens of witnesses, Joe hastily followed Jeremy out, while Albert struggled to clamber up from the floor, and regain his senses. Adelaide was both amused and horrified by what had transpired, but only due to the potential penalties Jeremy might encounter -- not by Ajax's suffering.

That was well deserved, she thought.

However, the boy's spontaneous actions had been foolish, and would only sponsor compassion for Johnson, galvanizing his position in the community. Even though her distrust of the man was still unexplained, Adelaide could not discard such a strong feeling, and she anxiously wished for him to cease his residency, and go bother someone else.

This was improbable if he became everybody's latest best friend.

Having garnered the forest animals' attention with his odd outburst, Eagle spoke. "If you attack the humans in the fashion that you suggest, Cougar, you will only vilify us, and prove their hostility against us to be well warranted.

"Violence cannot be used to solve a problem, for it only leads to others taking up cause against you. Regardless of the initial issue, you become their enemy by proxy."

The woodland inhabitants hesitantly agreed with the wise bird's argument, and thwarted, Cougar withdrew. Eagle was wrong; of this he was convinced. True security could only be obtained through an omnipresent threat of retaliation. The cost of aggression must be too high for your enemy to bear; this was the true way of the world.

Those who denied such an obvious principle were doomed to be forever subservient to those who understood it all too well.

Nevertheless, the creatures of the forest would resolve once again to do nothing, and Cougar remained alone in his resolve to seek revenge, and find safety through it.

Albert Johnson had discovered that he had an enemy as well, one that he, too, may need to teach the value of prudence at the heel of a boot, the point of a blade -- or even the barrel of a gun.

Hopefully, it would not come to that.

However, Johnson was not an optimist.

That much, by now, ought to be unmistakably apparent.

CHAPTER NINE:

THUNDERSTORMS ON THE HORIZON.

IT SEEMED AS IF THE DARK HUMOURS FOUND WRAPPED within the bland trappings of those Thanksgiving proceedings would never subside -- at least, not for Tanya.

Thanks to her, everyone who was not present at the community dinner was soon well-informed regarding the unfortunate events that had transpired there; either by telephone, or computer, there was little likelihood that one could have escaped hearing, in detail, of 'the punch heard around Suffield'.

It was not that Tanya had any particular grudge against Albert Johnson herself; she merely appreciated a good conflict, and this one presented the delightfully wonderful possibility of ongoing, long-term drama.

Many questions remained.

Would Johnson retaliate for his public humiliation? Did Jeremy satisfy his savage desires for revenge, or would he seek further retribution for his own personal disgrace, seen by the hockey captain to have been a malicious act committed on the part of Albert?

Writing extensively regarding the subject in her journal, Tanya was confident that, far from a conclusion, this comedic tragedy would hold many further, intriguing chapters -- and she would enjoy each paragraph, each sentence, and every single word.

After all, general day-to-day existence for the average Suffield resident was simply not that interesting; this went doubly so for Tanya Weatherington.

The Weatherington household consisted only of her mother and herself, no one else. Her father was a drifter, a nomad who could never settle in one place for any length of time; Tanya saw him only briefly, every two or three years. He would make an entrance unannounced, present his daughter with an ill-gotten

offering, argue with Tanya's mother over his absence, and then depart once more, perhaps to never be seen again.

As you might imagine, it took very little time for Tanya to develop a general cynicism towards her father; by the time she had grown into her late adolescence, she simply did not care whether he lived, or died.

Regarding that issue, she adequately fit the definition of 'nonchalant'.

Her mother, however, was severely affected by her estranged husband's sporadic appearances, and would take to her drink with even more zeal than usual, eventually collapsing onto the floor in unconsciousness -- like Peter Pemberton, but without his discretion.

Sadly, in her drunken stupor she was typically not terribly kind towards her daughter. Tanya's mother would frequently make a plain statement that she was the one to blame for her father's unwillingness to remain.

If she had never been born, it was dubiously claimed, her parents would not have separated, and would still be entwined in the embrace of their love.

This was, of course, an absurd notion, but alcohol is not known for promoting rational thought, or consideration of other's feelings.

Unfortunately, although the fault in her mother's logic might be evident to anyone else suffered to be subjected to it, a child is driven by instinct to accept maternal advice as gospel truth, and this oft-repeated accusation gravely hurt Tanya each time it was uttered, the pain she felt never decreasing.

That ridiculous opinion, that, by her mere existence, she could be responsible for such unhappiness, was worn heavily on her shoulders.

Fighting against this yoke, she would engage in rash behaviour, but this would always come to naught but further misery, and Tanya would inevitably return to the pre-manufactured, single story 'mobile home' that was her humble residence, to be berated by her mother for yet another heartbreaking moment.

Suffice it to say: any distraction she might find from her life of depressing tedium was a welcome one, and that Thanksgiving night had definitely qualified as such. Not only was the traditional festive menu a dramatic departure from the Weatherington's typical diet of 'Macaroni and Cheese' -- a pipe-shaped noodle based concoction in which dairy products had no real contribution -- but the evening's entertainment had also been first-rate.

For this, Tanya was quite thankful, indeed.

Tuesday, she would arrive at the school a full half-hour prior to the commencement of classes, so that widespread discussion could be had regarding that then-infamous altercation between one particular, popular student and his newly appropriated teacher.

There was widespread consensus that additional fireworks were guaranteed -- the replacement 'Physical Education' instructor, Mister Johnson, would serve as coach of the school's basketball, soccer and football teams as well.

Coincidentally, Jeremy Henderson was a prominent member of all three.

The bell rang, warning that enforced learning would begin imminently, and Adelaide Pemberton staggered in from the cold, snowy wind that briskly blew beyond the school's cinder-block walls.

"Piggy!" Tanya crowed, running merrily to meet her best friend in the entire world -- and Adelaide.

"I really wish that you wouldn't do that," protested Adelaide, obviously not in the best of spirits. "Gig's supposed to be a secret."

Tanya earnestly peered down the collar of Adelaide's jacket in an effort to spy her favourite furry acquaintance. "Oh, chill out. Make with the pig!"

Sighing heavily, Adelaide then ducked into a sheltered doorway, Tanya following closely, so that Gig could receive his customary morning affection.

"Seriously though," said his guardian, "I just don't want Gig's presence here advertised. I'm afraid something bad might happen to him."

Tanya frowned for a moment. "All right, I'll keep it quiet."

"Thanks," with relieved gratitude.

"So," probed the inquisitive Weatherington, "what else do you know?"

"About last night?"

"What else?" Tanya grinned manically.

"It's not really that amusing, you know; Jeremy's in a tonne of trouble."

"I guess you would be, when your Dad's a cop."

"Oh, you can believe it," Adelaide concurred wholeheartedly. "I've never heard them argue like that."

"Really?" Tanya raised her eyebrows. "I thought they were like, the father and son super-duo of the century or something."

Adelaide shook her head. "Nothing is sacred."

"No sager words have ever been spoken," agreed Tanya, solemnly.

"Don't you take anything seriously?"

"No," replied the seven year-old Tanya, while they sat on their bicycles, on the blacktop, out in the hot Saskatchewan summer sun. "There's no fun in that."

As if to punctuate her point, she dashed off, and then dangerously climbed atop the frame of her moving contraption in a demonstration of balance that had the potential to end in severe lacerations, and bruising.

They had met, randomly, on the street earlier that summer. It had not been an amicable first encounter; Adelaide's bicycle was found to have tipped over, and with Tanya the only other child in the vicinity, blame was quickly assigned. The lifetime prairie inhabitant had taken it all in stride, and shown to the newcomer how the asphalt had become soft in the sun, and her 'kickstand' had sank into it, causing the tumble.

Adelaide had grudgingly apologized, and Tanya had then mentioned her intent to mount an expedition to an old mine on the

opposite outskirts of Suffield; mildly fascinated, Adelaide expressed a tentative interest -- this caution would remain a part of their provisional friendship for the life of that association.

When they reached the edge of town, the children were struck by the enormous expanse that lay before them. Unblemished by human structures, or trees, the brown fields of wheat and grass stretched off to the horizon, at which chimney shaped towers of the blackest clouds Adelaide had ever chanced to gaze gathered as if in preparation to do battle with the surface below.

"Thunderclouds," noted Tanya. "They'll be here soon. We better hurry."

Long straw concealed the ground around the narrow path leading to the mine, and Adelaide was thoroughly warned regarding the presence of venomous, vicious, vile creatures with no capacity for empathy that erratically struck out at innocent passers-by, needing little provocation. Before striking their fatal blow, these devils would briefly generate a rhythmic, chattering sound, signalling a victim's approaching doom, hence the name 'rattlesnake'.

Taking this into account, the children very sensibly ran for their lives.

Whether the noises heard during their brief escapade were indeed those of Satan's serpents, or merely the clatter of dried hayseeds rustling in the breeze cannot be established with any real certainty; however, the associated excitement sure to have been conjured within the imaginations of those two friends is not something that is in dispute.

The mine was a simple hole in the ground, long since sealed up and impenetrable, but it might as well have been the lost entrance to El Dorado, or the gateway to a magical land at the center of the Earth, for all that it mattered. Gazing upon it was more than enough to both satisfy, and inflame youthful curiosities, silenced by awe, but howling with possibility.

Far off thunder was heard; a decision was promptly made to retreat, and return to their bicycles lest they be caught out in the torrential rains.

Another dash through the den of death, and they emerged from their collective fantasy with laughter and exuberance.

It was growing quite dark.

There was a magnificent creature there, at the edge of the town, when they emerged from the long straw, a four-legged beast with which Adelaide was instantly enamoured. Of obvious royal lineage, he stood tall and proud, fearless of the oncoming tempest, and instead welcoming of its fury.

"It's a horse," said Tanya.

"I know that," retorted Adelaide, unable to withdraw her gaze from the stallion.

"We have to go; we're going to get wet!"

"It's just water. You go, if you want."

"Crazy Vancouver-person," Tanya mumbled, riding away.

The rain came; so, too, did the lightning and the thunder. Adelaide and the steed stood out in it, together, sodden but unafraid of the bolts of electricity flying through the air about them.

It was concluded that she must have a horse.

Peter found his daughter there, standing in the storm, seemingly oblivious to it, and quite forcefully removed her to the interior of his motorcar, the man understandably angered by Adelaide's disregard for her own safety. Pleas would not be heard then. There was no horse in her near future.

Eventually, though, there would be Elmore. Until then, there would be Rumsfeld, consequently adopted by Peter in order to keep an eye on his insubordinate daughter.

There will be more about this later.

"You're going to kill yourself," Adelaide called after the recklessly self-endangering Tanya, who subsequently collapsed on to the asphalt in a tangle of limbs and steel bars.

She rode up, beside her battered friend who, although smarting, had not suffered any serious injury. "That doesn't look like much fun to me."

As if sharing in Adelaide's recollection, the older Tanya grimaced in discomfort, but then abruptly returned to the present. "Where is your boyfriend, anyway?"

"He's not my boyfriend!"

"Okay, fine. But, where is he?"

Adelaide sniffed. "He's fixing our furnace. His Dad figures he'd be better off not being here this week, anyhow. So he can cool off."

As if on cue, Albert Johnson emerged from around the corner, and began to stride down the hallway.

Spotting him, Adelaide then voiced her desire to quickly depart.

"Aw, but don't you want to watch me torment him?"

"No. Ajax gives me the creeps."

"Ajax?"

"Yeah. Albert Johnson. AJ. 'The Cleaner'. Ajax."

"Oh, I got you."

"Anyway, I'm leaving."

"Stick in the mud," chided Tanya. Without a single word further, Adelaide simply shook her head, and walked rapidly in the direction opposite to the fast approaching Albert.

He passed Tanya, and had carried on for perhaps two meters further when she chose to open her mouth, and expel some roughly worded English.

"Hiya Ajax," she chortled. "How's your nose?"

He stopped, frozen momentarily in what might have appeared, to an educated observer, to be shock.

Although to us it is evident that, at least at that time, Tanya Weatherington had absolutely no true understanding regarding the ominous significance of the moniker that she so-loosely applied to Albert Johnson that morning, the sinister entity upon which she

had verbally bestowed Adelaide's coincidental nickname was not so easily able to arrive at that conclusion.

Investigation was necessary.

"Ajax, huh?" He laughed. "That's a good one. Where'd you come up with that?"

"I thought it up myself," claimed Tanya with a false pride. "Do you like it?"

"I prefer 'Mister Johnson'."

"I'm sure you do," she smiled.

He scowled. "Shouldn't you be in class?"

"You never told me about your nose," Tanya persisted.

"My nose," he growled, "is fine."

Unconvinced: "If you say so."

"I do. Now, go to class. Unless you like detention."

Tanya feigned indignance. "Just trying to be friendly. See you around Ajax."

"I'll be seeing you, too."

Unsettlingly for the both of them, they each sensed a deeper underlying meaning hidden within the other's particular concluding proclamation. On the surface, however, since Tanya had Physical Education scheduled later that afternoon, there was little overtly ominous about those pleasantries.

"What's that?" asked the wide-eyed young girl, Tanya, regarding the little furry bundle held in her friend Adelaide's hands.

"He's a Pinnygig."

"A Pinnygig? Never heard of it. Let me see."

"Okay," said Adelaide, with some reservation. "Be careful with him, though."

The young Gig, nervous in unfamiliar hands, wheeled quietly while Tanya examined his prominent nose with interest.

“He sounds like a piggy. Better watch out, though; the snakes will eat him.”

At Adelaide’s insistence, there would be no further forays into the straw.

Tanya sat, and stroked Gig upon his Roman nose for several minutes, until Adelaide requested his return. Reluctantly, Tanya complied, but only after prolonging her encounter with the creature for the maximum length that his guardian would allow.

Like Adelaide, in her fascination with the horse, Tanya would beg her mother for the privilege of possessing her own guinea pig; this appeal was rejected, not only for the short-term, but forever. Never would Tanya be permitted to have any pet -- at any rate, not until adulthood.

Meanwhile, as Mister Johnson had ordered, Tanya proceeded to class. The morning passed ponderously, and the mid-day meal break finally arrived, known then as ‘lunch’.

Adelaide could be found, with Gig, in the ‘cafeteria’, a central eating lounge where the students could obtain food of questionable nutrition, typically casseroles. The fare of the day was a stew of potatoes, turnips and precious little meat, which was then covered liberally with the fermented tomato sauce known as ‘catsup’ --pronounced “ketchup.”

Honouring her friend’s wishes, Tanya ignored Gig’s existence, and instead prattled on about their inaugural session with Mister Ajax, to take place following their noon-hour consumption. That conversation was generally uni-directional, until Adelaide expressed an intention not to participate.

“You’d actually cut class?” asked Tanya, astonished.

“Gig’s not feeling well,” Adelaide explained, “and I don’t want to leave him in a gym locker when he’s sick.”

“He didn’t look sick this morning.”

“Well, Tanya, things change.” Adelaide looked off into space. “I’m going to say my tailbone hurts too much, and go to the library instead. Reading books is fun.”

“I will too, then. I’ll tell them I forgot my shorts.”

Annoyed, Adelaide rebuked her friend. "No, if you do that, they'll think we're up to something, and we'll get detention."

"But I don't want to go alone. I think you're right. There's something weird about that guy."

"You just think he's strange because he's black'," paraphrased Adelaide, sarcastically mocking her father to an oblivious audience.

Tanya began to respond, but the bell rang, and Adelaide walked off, rudely, without any adieu.

Basketball was the *jeux de jour*, a game in which a melon-sized ball was thrown at a bottomless net suspended high above the floor at each end of the school's 'gymnasium', an indoor recreation area roughly fifteen meters long, and five wide. Clad in rubber-soled shoes known as 'sneakers', those attending were divided into two opposing sides, the match to be refereed by a whistle-bearing Mister Johnson.

In spite of her repeated assertions that she had very limited competency regarding that particular pastime, Johnson insisted upon assigning Tanya the task of leading one of those teams, much to the distress of her fellow classmates, who agreed with her unenthusiastic self-assessment quite strongly.

Whether it was his intention to punish Tanya for her earlier transgression by humiliating her the way he had Jeremy, or if he only wished to observe this potential enemy's behaviour more closely is unclear, even today. However, regardless of his primary motive, both aims were definitively realized, and Albert Johnson learned conclusively that Tanya Weatherington was a very angry young woman, who held a great deal of inexplicable hostility toward him.

This placed her, along with Jeremy Henderson, in the category of prime suspects, and consequently, she would receive further inspection.

That very exclusive list was not one that you would have sanely preferred to be a member of.

Nor was being the subject of Ajax's comprehensive scrutiny an enviable position to be in.

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Nevertheless, Jeremy and Tanya were both on it, and in it.

For the moment, Adelaide was not.

Whether that situation would continue, remained to be seen.

Read on -- but tomorrow, please. Good night.

CHAPTER TEN:

THE POWER OF HUMAN POTENTIAL.

EVIL IS NOT BORN; it is grown.

Inside what begins as a perfectly innocent individual, it is a black seed, present inside all, but dormant until fed what is necessary to foster a sprout -- fear, hatred and rage.

Regarding this, Andrew Jackson was a prime example.

In the beginning, Andrew was a peaceful young man, incapable of intentionally hurting any living creature. He, quite literally, 'couldn't hurt a fly'. Unfortunately, when he reached college age, Andrew was unable to secure the funding required to continue his education, and with the prospects for those with only basic schooling low, he desperately sought other means of finding the needed finances.

Attempts at obtaining a scholarship failed. His family was well off, but he was estranged from them, having serious ideological differences. Sadly, this, to the award committee, was not a valid explanation, and he was refused. Left without any other options, he turned to the American military; in peacetime, they were offering new recruits a free college education, which held only a two-year commitment to serve as a soldier, after graduation.

This seemed to be a 'safe bet'. The United States was fighting no wars, and he was assured that there were no plans to do so any time soon. He would obtain his diploma, have his future secure, and only need spend two years partaking in staged military exercises with minimal personal risk.

He signed the paperwork.

He trained as a technician; his task was to repair electronic and computer equipment in the field of warfare. It was a non-violent role, with any weapons use on his part to be strictly defensive. Even if the unthinkable were to happen, Andrew would

not be required to violate any personal principles, and he could serve out his term without engaging in aggression.

It was quite palatable.

He met a woman, Michelle, who he married; the two had a daughter, Aleisha. They were happy.

Then, there was an assault. Aeroplanes were used to destroy two of the tallest buildings in America, resident in New York, the country's largest city. A terrorist organization, based in the Middle East, the region of Asia straddling the Persian Gulf, was blamed for the incident, and war was promptly declared.

Now part of the uninhabitable area of Asia, Afghanistan's government was assigned a large measure of responsibility for the atrocity, and was subsequently bombed, and invaded. Andrew was sent overseas, and took up his function as a repair technician, keeping his head below the line of fire as best he could.

This was certainly not his favoured activity, but it was better than being infantry, and forced to engage the enemy directly -- for that, he was thankful.

The vast might of the American military machine was swift, and the Afghani government was quickly removed from power. However, this was not a conventional war; unable to confront the invaders on their terms, the defenders permitted their subjugation so that they could foster an insurgency, in the same manner the French had done against the Germans over fifty years before, in the Second World War.

No one was safe; every foreign soldier became a target of improvised explosives and sniper's rifle rounds, especially support personnel. That being the case, Andrew Jackson was shot in the back, and the coccyx; he almost bled to death. He was sent to a military hospital in Germany, where, aside from his tailbone, he eventually recovered, and was to be sent home.

Unfortunately, the American government elected to expand their war to two fronts, invading the Persian country of Iraq. Jackson was not to return to the United States, but be sent to this new theatre, where his services as a technician would not be required. He had shot quite well during his training, and those

skills were more urgently needed, to battle snipers on rooftops, that country having too turned to insurgency, and resistance.

Without any ability to decline, he was transported to Iraq, and assigned to a group of five, charged with the task of tracking down insurgents, and disposing of them. Andrew Jackson did his utmost to avoid taking another human life for as long as he could, but eventually, locked in a fierce firefight with a number of Iraqis from which his company could not escape, he would be forced to take up his weapon, and start shooting.

Perhaps channelling the anger he had held within pertaining to his previous injury, or the chronic pain he felt from his tailbone, he killed five people in the space of a few tragic moments.

After that, his company christened him Ajax, and his morality was forever changed.

Ajax was an efficient soldier.

His company was assigned missions of progressively greater importance, as their reputation became increasingly better known. Following Ajax's example, they became a troupe of killing machines, unhindered by ethics, morals, or principles that only degraded further each fateful day that passed.

They were not beyond torturing and killing defenceless prisoners, or causing the deaths of innocent civilians as 'collateral damage' as long as the American cause was advanced. The formerly kind, caring Andrew Jackson had become one of the greatest monsters known to humanity.

As one might imagine, his wife did not take her revised husband at all well.

He returned, his 'tour of duty' completed, and found himself in the impossible situation of being a wolf trying to live with sheep. It didn't take very long before it became quite obvious that he could never abandon his new predatory nature, and return to a mundane existence as a 'normal citizen'.

Andrew must return to Iraq.

Ironically, his commanding officer, although starved for personnel, refused to take him back on, deeming him 'too dangerous' and a 'threat to his fellow soldier'.

Unable to remain with his family, and forbidden from resuming his life with the military, Andrew did the only thing he could think of -- he drank to excess, and then proved his commander correct by killing two other, similarly imbibing soldiers.

He fled, then. Running for his freedom, he discarded what remained of his former self, and made a sincere attempt to blend into obscurity, hoping that his murderous nature would eventually fade, and that he could once again be 'normal'.

Taking up occupancy of a one bedroom flat, he waited patiently for this to occur; then, he killed his neighbour despicably in a dispute over shared rubbish bins.

Undeterred, he merely collected his belongings, and moved on to a new city, and another ill-fated attempt.

To his credit, his patience lasted out longer in the second round. Andrew, now Albert, even found the courage to take up another occupation, as an attendant at a petroleum station, for refuelling motorcars. He did well; however, three men burst in late one evening, intending to rob the establishment of its loose currency, but unbeknownst to the criminals, Albert possessed much greater skill with their own weaponry than they did.

He killed them before they even had a chance to demand any money.

This, in and of itself, was not much of an issue; in fact, were that the story in its entirety, he could have been a contemporary hero, lauded for his courage -- but it was not.

Unfortunately, the two unrelated, innocent customers who had also been present inside the station, perusing carbonated beverages and oily snacks, also died, along with Albert's female co-worker, Ginny.

Vague and uncertain as to who had shot them, Albert, deciding that discretion was, as always, the better part of valour, departed before the authorities arrived, fleeing for a random destination chosen with intentional senselessness.

Life was getting to be a bit monotonous.

Albert found a dilapidated room at a 'motor-inn', near a highway exit between two unremarkable towns, and barricaded himself inside, contemplating his own suicide. Indeed, he had lost his wife, child, friends, career, and even his precious humanity -- there was no reason to continue his woeful existence on any longer. In fact, the world would have arguably been much better off without him.

However, it could be safely said that Albert's greatest quality was his simple drive for self-preservation.

One who had gone to such extraordinary lengths to stay alive was not liable to be inherently capable of taking from themselves what they coveted so dearly.

He would not act contrary to this hypothesis.

There had to be another solution. A more controlled, and less risky method of satisfying the monster that had taken residence within him must be available. He was certain that this avenue of thought would lead to his salvation.

Albert pondered, and it did not take much in the way of time, nor effort to grasp the notion that he could merely offer his services to the community as a professional killer.

The question then became, how.

It was not as if you could simply place an advertisement in the classified section of the daily newspaper, and wait for someone to telephone. Although arguably a vicious society, this hostility was kept hidden beneath a thin veneer of civility -- those who took part in reprehensible deeds in a publicly visible fashion were condemned, and locked away, or executed, often by those who were equally guilty, but had, in their own wicked activities, only been more prudent.

During his time in the service, Albert had frequently heard of 'soldiers-of-fortune', former military personnel who became killers for hire, but these men usually took part in exceedingly dangerous operations, and this sort of vocation would violate his prime rule, to stay alive. These missions also typically took place in foreign, far-off lands, and Albert was through with excessive international travel.

Like most people, he wanted to work close to home.

Therefore, he needed to find employ as a 'contract killer', commissioned by one to murder another, embarking upon domestic American assignments -- that held as little personal risk as might be possible. The only real difficulty came in the mechanics of negotiating these arrangements without inadvertently contacting the 'wrong' individual, and consequently falling victim to comprehensive legal prosecution.

To resolve this problem, he turned to the global communications system of the day, a network known as 'the Internet'.

With some simple skill, one could ensure anonymity, and evade an embarrassing encounter with undesirable individuals. The nature of the system allowed a user to cover one's proverbial tracks -- if you utilized a large enough number of computers.

Albert was clearly competent enough to succeed at this sort of enterprise.

It did not take very long before he had his first contract. A woman wished to be forever rid of her adulterous husband, and would pay well for guaranteed permanence. After brief negotiations, Mister Ajax would agree to take on the task, and, after monitoring the man's movements for several days, chose an opportune moment upon which to do as he was instructed, and end yet another life.

He was well remunerated, and resided in dingy flophouses no longer. A man of style and sophistication, he was sharply dressed, and stayed in only the best hotels. Albert's high-class ways soon drew the attention of better paying clientele, and, rather than acting as the mournful conclusion to common domestic disputes, he would instead be called upon to, for example, assassinate businessmen who possessed too much ambition -- or, perhaps, those with too little.

He rose through those esteemed ranks of hired murderers quickly, until one day, the Smiths made contact with him, and from then onward, his future in crime was secured.

If you had told the young pacifist, Andrew Jackson, that he would one day become the famous contract killer 'Mister Ajax', he would have loudly questioned your sanity.

That his faith in himself would have been so grossly overestimated is sad, indeed.

"Mister Ajax," Mister Smith greeted him, warmly, "it is certainly a privilege to make your acquaintance."

The Smith, hidden behind the veil in the deep-underground antechamber, extended his hand symbolically, in shadow. To reciprocate, Ajax bowed, slightly.

Despite an invitation to do so, Mister Ajax would not sit.

He never sat.

"I am pleased to meet you, as well," he replied, masking his enthusiasm with pleasant professionalism. "Your reputation precedes you."

"As does yours," said the Smith. "As you may know, we form an association of mutual interests. Those are generally quite profitable, and individuals in our employ who aid us in our affairs are well rewarded."

"I am sure that they are."

"Your faith is appreciated." The Smith paused. "For your first assignment, we would like you to attend to a rather delicate matter."

Whatever little humanity Andrew also known as Albert presently masquerading as Mister Ajax had remaining, it would soon be gone.

"Please continue," he said.

The Smith sighed. "One of our now former associates has betrayed our collective trust, and must be eliminated."

"I see no problem here."

"Unfortunately," the Smith continued, a quiver in his voice, "we have decided that, to discourage further treachery, we have to act decisively, and with resounding punctuation."

A few quiet moments passed, before Ajax eventually interjected a polite, "Well then, go on, please."

Clearing his throat, the Smith carefully explained. "In order to foster future compliance, the man's family must die as well."

"The man's entire family?"

"Yes."

Then, he asked a terrible, but necessary question. "How many children?"

"Four."

It was then Ajax's turn to pause, whilst contemplating the ethical implications of this most-ghastly assignment.

"Four?" Seeking clarification, a subtle hint of disgust was present in Albert's voice.

"Four." The Smith was similarly disturbed.

A longer pause then occurred.

Tentatively: "Can I take time to consider this?"

"No." The answer was brusque. "This must be done tonight."

He had killed many men, and even some women. However, Andrew-come-Albert had never murdered a child. With the memories of his own offspring forever pervasive inside his troubled mind, this prospect was one that he had been previously incapable of envisioning in any capacity whatsoever.

However, the Smiths would not request his services further were he not to accept this despicable task, and follow through with their evil plot. In consequence, he was the epitome of a man conflicted, torn between his last remaining moral conviction, and a strong desire to achieve personal success.

Paradoxically, part of that success was to ensure the financial welfare of his daughter, the beneficiary of anonymous sums of cash warily accepted by a mother with little alternatives.

Convincing himself that he too was bereft of any other options, Albert promptly accepted their offer. The details of his victims were provided to him -- in addition, the Smiths would ask that their principle target die in an exceptionally gruesome manner.

Disabling their security system, the assassin crept into the traitor's home in the early morning, when those condemned were deep in slumber. Using a knife, he would quietly slit the throat of the woman who served as wife and mother, when she rose to pay the bathroom a visit.

The man was to be decapitated. This required a great deal of work, since this was meant to occur whilst he was still alive. Despite the sharpness of the knife, it really is quite difficult to sever the spinal cord at that point, and the affair became a rather bloody one.

Then, came the matter of the children.

At his meeting the day following, Mister Ajax would relate the particulars of those subsequent gloomy events to the Smiths. After disposing of his bloodstained clothes, he left the remains of his adult victims, and kind, caring Albert Johnson then convinced the four remaining targets to accompany him to safety, running away from the merciless assassin that had just so-brutally killed their parents.

It seems that he proceeded to drown them in the nearest river, like unwanted kittens in a burlap sack. Apparently, that last taboo was one no longer.

Regarding his performance, the Smiths were very pleased with Mister Ajax, and would appropriately make various, large contributions to his personal accounts in the weeks, months and years that followed -- remuneration for an assortment of terrible crimes.

Then, one day, he would be told of eccentric scientists, and peculiar guinea pigs.

He would laugh, as you know, and then he would take on the task, as he had so many others.

Finally, and as I have well explained, to finish it, nothing, and no one would stand in his way.

Of this, I can well assure you.

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

SECRETS.

JEREMY WAS CHOPPING WOOD.

Returning from school that Tuesday, Adelaide found the young man engaged in what was likely to be forced manual labour, continued penance for his transgressions of the day previous.

“How much wood does a woodchuck chuck?” asked Adelaide, both comically and rhetorically.

“Funny,” spat Jeremy. “This is so you don’t freeze your tail off, you know?”

“Repairs didn’t go so well?”

He sighed. “No. It was much worse than I thought; the whole motor assembly needed to be sent to Saskatoon. It won’t be back until Friday, probably.”

“Oh. Great,” Adelaide groaned at the spectre of several evenings spent upon the sofa.

Ignoring her protestations, Jeremy cut more wood.

When he paused to catch his breath, Adelaide asked him the most pressing question on her mind.

“How’d things go with your Dad?” she inquired, hesitantly.

The impromptu woodsman frowned. Crouching to provide the wagging Rumsfeld with some much-needed attention, he then related his account of the events in question.

They had not gone all that well.

Jeremy had bolted from the Thanksgiving community dinner at a quick march, heading precisely nowhere in particular, only away from Albert Johnson. His father had taken quick chase, and apprehended his son before the errant boy had gone too far.

"Look, Dad," Jeremy had started, before the policeman had been given the chance to speak, "if you're going to arrest me, then do it. Otherwise, leave me alone."

He began to walk again, boots crunching in the snow.

"Now, just a minute Jeremy," his father called after him.

"No," the young man shouted angrily ahead, before turning about to face Joe, "that guy is a menace. He deserved it. I won't apologize."

"You can't behave that way to people."

"Why? Because it's uncivilized? Sometimes those people need a good punch in the nose. They don't understand anything else."

"They don't? Or you don't?"

Jeremy threw up his hands in the air whilst slowly pacing backwards. "Well, like I said. Either arrest me, or leave me alone." He turned around once more, and resumed his fast pace away from the scene of the crime.

Constable Henderson terminated his pursuit, choosing to give his quarry the opportunity to see reason. It was not as if he would be unable to find the offender later, in any case.

He had walked then, Jeremy, to the school and the soccer field, the arena for an outdoor game in which players kicked about a chequered ball. He had found a place to sit, on a bank of snow, and had studied the stars through a clearing in the clouds, pondering the meaning of his existence.

Little was arrived at in the way of a conclusion.

Eventually, Jeremy was forced by necessity to carry on, lest his limbs freeze in the winter's frigid air, saddened by his actions but unrepentant. He would never express any remorse to Johnson - - Jeremy might have been wrong to strike the man, but the motivation behind that violence was no less valid in consequence.

He had gone home, then, head held high, but soul held low, pride and shame heard in concert. Joe was waiting; in an effort to warm his frostbitten son, he illegally furnished Jeremy with a strong alcoholic beverage known as 'scotch'. Following that, he

stayed his hand while his child recovered, and regained his usual complexion.

Unfortunately, Jeremy was still quite stubborn, and soon quiet conversation turned into loud argument. It was decreed that Jeremy would not be attending school for the remainder of the week, to avoid any additional altercations with Mister Johnson. Furthermore, he would be given a long list of chores to perform whilst he was confined under house arrest. Assuming that Albert found these terms to be acceptable, there would be no need to prosecute Jeremy for assault.

Jeremy alleged that Joe was only concerned with his own interests, a charge the officer vehemently denied. Realizing that, perhaps, he had overstepped his boundaries, the young man retreated into his bedroom before hostilities escalated.

“Adelaide,” Peter had shouted to his daughter, the girl preparing to venture outdoors to visit their neighbour, “you better not be thinking about going anywhere!”

She had been, but did not, and Jeremy was left alone to brood for the remainder of the evening.

The next morning, he had been made to shovel the walks and driveways of the entire street, starting at the crack of dawn. Joe stopped in at the Pemberton household whilst Adelaide was preparing for school, to inform them of Jeremy’s punishment, and confirm that his son would tend to the malfunctioning furnace when he concluded his open-air activities.

Adelaide was requested not to engage in discussion with Jeremy that morning; to ensure it, Peter insisted upon accompanying his daughter to school, a situation she was not terribly happy with.

Despite his strenuous labour, Jeremy was unable to shake his rage. While examining the furnace, he had a lengthy debate with Peter regarding Albert Johnson’s intentions during the hockey match. He continued to contend that Johnson had encouraged the team’s collapse, and his personal humiliation. Peter, on the other hand, failed to see the captain’s position.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit egotistical to assume that someone you’ve never met is, for no discernable reason, ‘out to get you’?”

Jeremy snorted. "It may seem that way, yes, but --"

"But?"

"Well, I can't explain it any other way."

"It doesn't seem the slightest bit ridiculous?" Peter queried leadingly.

"I don't want to talk about it," snapped Jeremy. "Now, will you let me do my work here?"

Not willing to lose his services, Peter left the junior Henderson to his task.

That Jeremy had accidentally broken the furnace motor was a detail he would not relay to Adelaide, or anyone else. An obstinate bolt and too much force led to his spanner slipping, mistakenly damaging a more delicate component that was beyond his capacity to replace.

The embarrassment felt over his unwelcome achievement overruled his honesty, and instead, he would insist upon financing the consequent repairs himself, not out of responsibility, but false charity.

He would also chop a great deal of wood.

"So," said Jeremy, returning to the present, "how was his nose?"

Adelaide laughed. "It looked pretty sore. I didn't stay around long enough to hear it from him, though. I don't want to have anything to do with him."

"That's understandable," Jeremy agreed.

"I'm glad you think so." She leaned up against a fence. "Tanya spoke to him, though, so she might know more. She also went to Physical Education."

"You didn't?"

Adelaide held up her coccyx cushion. "Hello? Broken tailbone here."

"Bruised."

“Whatever.”

It was getting cold.

“Well, thanks,” said Adelaide. Jeremy nodded in acknowledgement.

“Oh yeah, it’s probably best you don’t come over for a while,” he said. “Just until my Dad settles down.”

“Okay,” she noted, and then young woman, dog and guinea pig went into their home, warmed by the fire raging in its hearth.

Tanya met Adelaide at the school’s entrance the following morning.

“That detestable personage of depraved moral fibre has committed an unforgivable assault upon my integrity,” she did not exactly say.

“What integrity?” Adelaide did not precisely respond, but the sentiment was the same.

“Why do I even bother with you?” barked Tanya. “I’d be better off being friends with a rattlesnake. At least I’ll know when it’s going to bite me.”

Adelaide apologised, yet again. “My tailbone is getting on my nerves. Sorry. What happened?”

Tanya comprehensively, and quite colourfully, filled in the missing details. “And so,” she concluded, “I hate him.”

“Join the club.”

“Why thank you, I think I will. Today, I get to skip out on Physical Education. I don’t care what you say.”

Adelaide was not pleased, but relented to her friend’s demand, nevertheless.

In the odd, cryptic system by which class schedules were arranged, that day’s session with Mister Johnson was the first. Gig was tucked safely away, inside an old cardboard box kept in the bottom of one of the change-room lockers, and Adelaide joined her fellow students in their engagement with the man who had slighted Tanya so unkindly the afternoon previous.

Thankfully, Adelaide Pemberton did not similarly draw his attention.

Instead, he decreed that they participate in 'dodge-ball', a sadistic ritual where a number of melon-sized, inflated rubber globes were distributed randomly amongst the children, who were then encouraged to toss those projectiles at their peers. Adelaide did her best to protect her wounded tailbone, taking a knock to the chin in the process.

Sporting a bruise, she said, "I hope you're happy," to Tanya, during the lunch break.

"Ooh, sorry," replied her friend with minor concern. "That looks sore."

"Well," Adelaide smiled, "tomorrow's your problem." It would be so.

Whilst Gig and his guardian quietly entertained themselves in the warm, comfortable library, Tanya would once again make the poor decision to refer to Albert Johnson as 'Ajax' directly, leading to several frigid laps circling the exterior of the building having been made by both her and her classmates -- in very minimal attire.

Predictably, her classmates were not terribly impressed, and conveyed their collective disgruntlement quite adequately, at the close of the school's daily business.

Friday, the final day of the week, would end with Adelaide successfully avoiding any serious scrutiny on the part of Mister Johnson, aside from the occasional jest regarding her coccyx. Tanya would playfully maul Gig, and then they would all embark upon their traditional end-of-week raid on the diner, in search of sugar and grease.

"Meat, cheese, bun," Adelaide proudly declared, before sinking her teeth into precisely that.

"Something's got to be done about that guy," whispered Tanya over her ice-thickened, sweetened milk. "He's going to be nothing but trouble. I can feel it."

"Wasn't it only a week ago that you thought he was a 'hot product'?"

“A lot can happen in a week.”

Adelaide slowly nodded in agreement. “Well, Jeremy and I are with you, but I don’t think you’ll find much support from the rest of the town.”

Indeed, Albert Johnson was presently making pleasantries with the townsfolk assembled at the diner’s counter; laughter and joviality then ensued. Meanwhile, the two young women discussed various, mostly outlandish methods of disposing of their nemesis, with grins and muted giggling.

Suddenly, Ajax appeared aside the booth.

“Having fun, are we?” he interjected with glossed glee, startling the pair into a stunned silence. No response forthcoming, he continued. “Still on that cushion, huh?” he rhetorically asked of Adelaide, whose eyes betrayed her understanding, but nothing else.

“And you,” he turned to Tanya, “will get detention if you ‘forget’ your shorts one more time.” He moved to depart, and then paused.

“Hold on. You two are friends?”

Two, or three seconds passed.

“No-no-not really,” Adelaide finally stuttered. “We just come here on Friday’s, for shakes.” Tanya murmured an incoherent supporting argument.

“So, just acquaintances then?”

“We’re lab partners,” Tanya blurted, before shrinking into the corner of her seat.

“Ah. A professional association. I see.” Seemingly satisfied, he bid them good evening, and then moved along.

Adelaide and Tanya then collapsed, sagging almost to the floor in relief.

Further debate then ensued regarding potential, more effective solutions to their difficulty than previously proposed, but none was uncovered, and soon, the meeting was adjourned. They went their separate ways.

It was twilight, and Jeremy was in his back garden, configuring a telescope.

"Where'd you get that from?" inquired Adelaide, curiously.

"My Dad gave it to me for Christmas a few years back. I wasn't really interested, though, until the other night. After I punched Johnson, I went to the soccer field, and looked up at the stars, and thought, 'those are pretty neat'.

"So, here we are."

One star blinked into the sky, and then a second. On bended knee, Jeremy directed his telescope towards the brighter of the two, focussed, and then invited Adelaide to look. She was impressed, and the tour of the heavens continued.

"See," said Jeremy, "that's the North Star. And that one, that's Sirius, the Dog Star."

"How do you know?"

"Google Sky."

"Oh."

"Anyway," he continued, "they say you can find your way if you're lost, if you look for those stars." They remained outdoors for quite some time, while the sky darkened, and the spectacle above bloomed into a symphony of light.

The furnace repaired, the regular Pemberton schedule resumed, with Adelaide eventually retiring to her room for the night, Gig snug in his 'house' and Peter sequestered within his study, inebriated. Mick Hervey's death had been determined as one accidental, and title to the Feed and Supply was consequently released. Joe had been by that afternoon to render his verdict on the matter.

Not entirely satisfied, he had been unable to find any evidence to the contrary, and was forced to make that conclusion, at least officially.

That issue resolved, his problem then became one of what he ought to do next. Peter could attempt to quietly sell the business, and then pray that, for the remainder of his days, his daughter never learned of the affair. However, his confidence in

that outcome was rather restricted, since the town was rife with gossiping.

Even if he did nothing, that factor was liable to upset his secrecy quite quickly, anyhow. He was thankful that Constable Henderson was discreet.

He poured himself another drink, and fretted until early morning, when he would eventually discover some fleeting peace, in dreams where Julia, Peter, Adelaide and Thomas O'Malley all lived happily in Vancouver, and none of this had ever happened.

Dawn broke on Saturday, and soon it was time, once more, to make the long journey to the next town, where they would obtain supplies for Elmore, the horse.

Adelaide would approach her father on the subject of Albert Johnson, and he would rebuke her again, accusing her of racism and xenophobia. Despite her strenuous insistence that this was not the case, and her substantial circumstantial arguments, Peter would not see her reason -- the atmosphere swiftly turned to one of adversarial hostility.

Peter would sardonically blame the entire disagreement on Adelaide's tender coccyx, and she would resist the urge to slap him. She was not, she stated flatly, being disagreeable merely due to a pain in her bottom. He laughed, and she was unable to resist his mirth, soon succumbing to his humour and finding herself cheerful, for the moment.

They would obtain the food, and return to the outskirts of Suffield, where resided Elmore the horse. Fatigued due to a lack of sleep, Peter would ask Adelaide to locate the stable master, and settle their account.

"I can't accept this," said the stablemistress, an older woman, tersely when Adelaide presented her with the cheque for her stake in Elmore's monthly expenses.

Adelaide looked confused. "But, we owe you this money, don't we?" she replied, timidly.

"Well, of course not," the stablemistress explained. "For one thing, Elmore's your horse."

"Since when?" demanded one incredulous Adelaide.

"Since Mick Hervey left him to you?" It was the stablemistress's turn to sound perplexed.

"Elmore was Mick Hervey's horse?" This was information of which Adelaide was completely unaware.

"Yes." The tone in the older woman's voice left no doubt.

"Oh." Mildly taken aback, Adelaide paused. "And what's the other thing?"

"He paid enough board to last well into Elmore's old age. All you need to supply is feed, but that shouldn't be a problem, given your father's situation."

"And what is that?" Adelaide mentally prepared herself for further surprises.

"Doesn't your father own the Suffield Feed and Supply now?"

Although that revelation appeared to have the ring of truth, the young Pemberton required some measure of clarification. "Where did you get that idea?"

"The estate lawyer mentioned it in passing. When he informed me regarding Elmore."

"Well, that's news to me."

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry if I've caused you any trouble."

"I don't think it's you who needs to apologise, and you've caused me no trouble at all. My father on the other hand --"

CHAPTER TWELVE:

A GHOSTLY MESSAGE.

PETER WAS ADAMANT, or at least he was trying to be.

He had been rudely awakened from his nap by the unexpected return of one exceptionally angry daughter. It appeared that the stabledmistress had ‘spilled the beans’ on him, and revealed that which he had previously preferred to keep undisclosed.

The news that Elmore had, first of all, been Mick Hervey’s horse, and, secondly, had been left to Adelaide in his will was, to Peter Pemberton at any rate, not terribly surprising. It only contributed to his overwhelming suspicions that the world was ‘out to get him’, and that it was only a matter of time before it would succeed.

His prediction, that Adelaide would insist upon keeping the Feed and Supply, was accurate, and she had spent the last hour telling him this, when she was not calling him a liar, a rogue, a scoundrel and whatever other synonym his daughter could draw out from the recesses of her infuriated mind.

Peter wanted nothing to do with Mick Hervey’s former business. This was a point that, although he made plain to Adelaide, failed to be accompanied with any solid justification. He could continue with his geological work, and simply hire staff to manage the Feed and Supply -- his logic, Adelaide would argue, for selling the store was obviously flawed, and he simply desired to do so to further ruin her life.

Of course, this was the pattern of history. Every decision her parents had ever made had been solely, maliciously motivated to prove as detrimental to Adelaide as possible. Why, she mused, ought that change in the present.

She was overreacting, to put it mildly. However, Peter’s lie was indeed a grave transgression, one for which he knew full well there was only a single reparation.

He would need to retain the Feed and Supply.

This was not an inevitability that he resigned himself to lightly. In fact, father and daughter would argue the issue, and dispute the facts well into the evening before Peter would finally relent.

Adelaide would be triumphant.

However, this victory would not be without conditions. Adelaide would attend to the store every afternoon, after her schooling had completed, sweeping up floors, and tending to the bookkeeping. As well, she would spend four hours each Saturday 'minding the shop'.

Unaware, perhaps, as to the extent of her commitment, she heartily agreed. Adelaide Pemberton would continue the legacy of Mick Hervey, a man she revered, and the fulfilment felt by the young woman would cast the matter of Albert Johnson aside in her mind while she revelled in the prospects of her new future.

Several days would pass, and the events surrounding Thanksgiving would fade from memory. No further confrontations took place between the Physical Education instructor and his students. Peter continued to poison his liver with liquor. Rumsfeld and Gig were happy to see Adelaide in better spirits. All was well.

"So," said Old Mick, "If I have L eggs, how many eggs do I have?"

The girl wrinkled her nose in thought. "Twelve," she answered. "One dozen."

"What if I had two L's?"

"X?"

He smiled. "That's a good girl. And what is that numerically?"

"Twenty-four," she replied confidently.

"Correct! Now, tell me the value of a DOG." This early version of their alphabetic base-26 system was simplistic; each letter translated to a two-digit value.

In contemplation, young Adelaide's brow furrowed. The D would equate to four, 04, but as the first number, the zero would be discarded. O was fifteen, 15, and G was 7, or 07.

"Four-one-five-zero-seven."

"Or?"

"Forty-one thousand, five hundred and seven."

Mick was visibly pleased with his student's mathematics progress. "Okay, tell me what word is thirty thousand, one hundred and twenty."

Twenty was represented by T. The zero from thirty was placed in front of the one, and became A. This left three, which was C.

The child laughed. "It's a CAT."

Although amusing, this scheme failed to function if you attempted to add letters or numbers together. It was merely a simple cipher, not an actual numeric system. For that, Adelaide would need to wait, until her skills became somewhat more advanced.

"Hey," said Jeremy, greeting the sweeping, older Adelaide. "Say, have you got any birdseed?"

Adelaide looked at him queerly. "You don't have a bird."

"So? Maybe I want to feed the ones outside. It is winter, you know."

"Not officially," she corrected him.

"You have lived here for a while, haven't you? You should know by now that there's only two seasons. Freeze, and bake. This", he declared broadly, "is freeze."

"I know; I was just being silly. That still doesn't explain why you want it. All the smart birds have fled, and you shouldn't interfere with natural selection by feeding those stupid enough to stay around."

Annoyed: "Fine, smartypants. Maybe I like to eat it. How about that?"

“Crunchy.” She grinned. “Okay, you win. How much birdseed?”

Jeremy looked flustered. “I honestly hadn’t thought that far ahead. Five dollars worth?”

“That’s a lot of birdseed.”

“What do you care? Don’t you want my money? This is a business, right?”

Displaying a pained expression, Adelaide retrieved five dollars worth of birdseed. “*Bon appetit.*”

“Thanks.”

“No, thank you. That five dollars will send me to college.”

“I have to say, your customer skills need improvement.”

With crude vernacular, she then proved his point.

“Nice, Adelaide, nice.” Jeremy shook his head. “Anyway, what are you doing for Halloween?”

“I think Tanya wants to go blow up mailboxes.”

“Sounds productive.”

“She thought so.”

Jeremy went silent, and Adelaide resumed her sweeping.

“There’s this party, if you want to come,” he offered, eventually.

She stopped her menial labour, and looked at him oddly. “With your preppy school-buddies?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not really my scene.” Adelaide began to sweep again.

Jeremy sighed. “Look, I know I haven’t been the best of friends that way, but I want to make up for it.”

“Why now?” she asked suspiciously. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll embarrass you in front of your ‘friends’?”

“You really know how to ‘look a gift horse in the mouth’, don’t you?”

“This is a gift?”

“I give up. Look, Adelaide, if you want to come, it’s at Mike’s place, over on Tennyson. You can even bring Tanya, if you want.”

“She’s not my dog.” Adelaide shrugged her shoulders, and wandered away, sweeping. Jeremy departed, then, somewhat crestfallen.

The days plodded along, growing progressively darker, and soon, Halloween was upon Suffield. This annual festivity featured gross consumption of confectionaries, pumpkins carved into hideous faces, and the illicit use of colourful gunpowder-based rockets, known as fireworks, originally produced by the Chinese.

Originally a pagan end-of-year celebration, it was said to be a time of weakening in the wall that separated the land of the living from the realm of the dead. As such, both children and adults would masquerade as ghoulish creatures, the notion being that should such abominations intrude upon the mortal world, they would treat those costumed as one of their own, and do them no harm.

Falling on the last day of October, it also meant the monthly Suffield Feed and Supply bookkeeping for joint proprietor Adelaide Pemberton.

“I say we crash it,” said Tanya, haunting Adelaide whilst she performed her sums.

“Crash what?” asked the mentally occupied Adelaide, absent-mindedly.

Tanya seemed perturbed by her friend’s distraction. “Jeremy’s preppy party, of course. What else?”

“Your Mom’s car?”

“Nah, I did that last month. It’s still busted.” She meant broken.

Processing Tanya’s last comment, Adelaide re-directed her awareness suddenly.

"I'm kidding!" laughed Tanya. "I got your attention though."

"We have no costumes."

"I am my own costume," Tanya countered. "We'll just put a sheet on you, and you can go as a ghost. Like Charlie Brown."

"Good grief."

"See? You're already fitting the part."

Adelaide returned to her bookkeeping. There was a discrepancy, an incorrect value carried from the month before. She would need to examine the September records, and attempt to correct it.

At the bottom of the ledger was a number she instantly recognized.

9,332,387,641

Somewhere in the past, twelve year-old Adelaide was engaged in her customary Saturday morning conversation with Mick Hervey.

"Gig is doing just fine," she apprised the guinea pig's former guardian. "Rumsfeld and Elmore too."

"Glad to hear it. And you?"

"Well," she said, frustrated, "I'm not doing so well in Math."

"What if I told you our little code could be used to add. Subtract, multiply and divide as well, if we just take it one teensy step further."

"How teensy?" Adelaide had the poor feeling it was really going to be rather large.

"Let's just give it a go, shall we?"

Warily, she agreed.

Mick then explained the true nature of numbers, and then, his pupil uncomprehending, he did it again.

“So,” he extrapolated, “words can be computed just like numbers. All we need to do is translate numbers to ‘words’, and vice-versa. Then, you can do your work with letters instead.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“Well, take CAT for example. To get its decimal value, we take the value for C, three, and then multiply it by twenty-six, the number of letters in the alphabet. Then, we add the value of A, one. We multiply that by twenty-six, and then finally, add the last letter, T, or twenty.

CAT is, therefore, two thousand and seventy-four.”

“That is complicated!”

“Not if you practice.”

Adelaide began to suffer from a headache.

“What about going the other way? From a number to letters?”

“Well, in that case, we decode the letters from right to left. The last letter is the remainder left from dividing the number by twenty-six. In the case of two thousand and seventy-four, this is twenty, or T.

The quotient is seventy-nine. To get the second letter, we divide that by twenty-six, and take the remainder once again. That is, in this case, one, or A.

What we have left is three, and since three is less than twenty-six, we know it’s the last letter. Three is C.

Place the three letters in order from right to left, T, A, and C.”

“CAT,” said Adelaide.

“Right you are.”

“It’s too hard.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what. If you tell me what LOLLY is, as a number, next time, I’ll give you one.”

“Just one?”

Mick laughed. "Okay, I'll give you a whole bag. But you'd better be right."

Adelaide spent several hours over the following week earning her caramelised sugar, and became quite proficient at base-26 mathematics. As such, when Adelaide the bookkeeper spied the number 9,332,387,641 looking up at her from the bottom of Mick Hervey's ledger, she was taken breathless.

It was her name, ADELAIDE.

She stared at it for a while, soon drawing Tanya's curiosity. "What is it?"

"It's me."

"What, like a telephone number or something?"

"No, it's my name. In base-26."

"Geek. What are the numbers beside it? On the facing page?"

Adelaide examined them. They were 221,453; 248; 13,733; and 822,253. Taking her pencil, she began to scribble out the solution.

"Well, the first one is LOOK." She continued working.

"How intriguing," said Tanya.

"Then IN, THE and ATTIC."

"Adelaide, look in the attic," Tanya repeated, her voice trembling. "Hey," she perked up, "you're putting me on, aren't you? Good one!"

"No, I'm not."

Tanya squinted at her. "Are you sure you're not putting me on?"

"Quite."

"Oh. Well, to the attic, then!"

"There's no attic here. Mick Hervey lived in a tiny room to the back of the shop, but there's nothing above it."

“That’s a problem, then.”

The pair sat in thought for a moment.

“What if he means your house?” Tanya ventured.

It took but a fraction of a second for Adelaide to remember the mysterious hatch in the ceiling of her room.

With both excitement and fear, the duo quickly made their way back to the Pemberton household, where they then proceeded to the Henderson residence, adjacent, to acquire a ladder.

Having done so, they ascended with it, up the stairs, to the second floor of Adelaide’s home, and into her room, where, setting the ladder upright, they then advanced upon the attic, where they found the hatch sealed shut.

Debate then ensued surrounding the merits of forcing open the hatch with violence, or waiting for Peter to return from wherever he was presently, as he was not present. Not surprisingly, Tanya preferred the former, while Adelaide argued for the latter.

Tanya’s speculations that treasure, firearms or other fantastical items might be entombed above soon swayed Adelaide to appreciate her rash acquaintances point of view, and an agreement was reached to share responsibility for whatever damage might have been generated through their inelegant techniques.

Hunting for a battering ram, they happened upon the leaf to the dining-room table; the two used it to assault the hatch until it surrendered, and came free.

They scrambled up the ladder.

The attic was empty, save a large banker’s desk. This was strange, in that the desk could not have been placed there by way of the small hole that comprised the only access to the attic.

Tanya made haste for the drawers, but found them locked. “Let’s break them open,” she pleaded.

“No, I think we’ve broken enough stuff for one day. Besides, whatever’s in there is probably private. Who knows how long this has been up here for. No, I should tell my Dad.”

“Spoil-sport. Hey, what’s that?”

From under the desk, Tanya retrieved a cloth sack. Eagerly, she dumped the contents onto the attic floor. Various garments of some age spilled out, likely from the early twentieth century. It was not long before Tanya suggested they fashion costumes from the items.

Rummaging, Adelaide discovered a frilly white blouse, and a pair of worn workman's cloth trousers. She was to be a buccaneer. Tanya swiftly chose a striped 'zoot-suit', of the style worn by Chicago gangsters in the early 1940's, and the two descended from the attic to complete their façade's with appropriate makeup and accessories.

Gig perched on Adelaide's shoulder, like a pirate Captain's parrot.

It was dark when they departed the house -- their destination: the party hosted by Mike, to which Jeremy had extended an invitation. The air was thick with the smell of sulphur, a by-product of extensive fireworks detonation, while young children made their way from one house to the next, demanding confections from homeowners lest the little ruffians damage their properties instead.

"Can I help you?" asked Adrian, a particularly snobbish schoolmate who, clad in medieval armour, challenged them Michael's door.

"I don't know," replied Tanya. "Can you?"

Adrian appeared puzzled. "I don't think you belong here, Tanya," he said.

"You're so right," agreed Tanya. "However, sometimes life doesn't make much sense."

"We're invited," interjected Adelaide.

"Oh, greetings, Adelaide. I couldn't recognize you in that costume. Are you supposed to be Errol Flynn?"

Tanya looked questioningly at Adelaide, unfamiliar with the name. "Never mind," her friend quietly advised her. "I'm a buccaneer," she told Adrian. "Now, let us in."

“Well,” mused Adrian, “I don’t know. I think you need to answer three riddles --”

“They’re with me,” snapped Jeremy, appearing from behind the arrogant knight in his father’s discarded police uniform, a relic from trimmer days.

“Step aside, Sir Stupid,” taunted Tanya. Grumbling his discontentment, Adrian complied, stamping a retreat into the house.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” Jeremy said, leading his guests inside. “You didn’t seem that interested when I mentioned this.”

“Well,” said Tanya, “we found these great costumes, and then decided, puzzlingly, to waste them on you.”

Jeremy ignored her, instead turning to Adelaide for a less-sarcastic explanation.

He would not get one. “You shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” she said. He sighed, and led them onward.

They descended below, to the basement, and into Michael’s ‘family room’, where the adolescent revellers were engaged in gaiety.

“No rats,” said Adrian, referring to Gig, perched upon Adelaide’s shoulder.

“He’s not a rat,” retorted Jeremy, “he’s a CAVY.” Adelaide laughed, and Adrian skulked angrily away, again.

The evening wore on. In the spirit of Halloween giving, Tanya distributed her sarcasm liberally amongst those in attendance, while Adelaide simply stood to the side, and talked quietly with Jeremy, the two seemingly oblivious to outside influences -- much to the chagrin of the popular young man’s other acquaintances.

“So, where did you two find those get-up’s?” he inquired of Adelaide, during a lull in conversation.

“From the attic. It’s weird. There’s a desk up there, but it must have been built in. It’s pretty large.”

"That is strange," agreed Jeremy. "Is it empty?"

"I don't know. It's locked."

"Ah, a mystery," he smiled. "I like mysteries."

"Well, you'll think it's just wonderful, then, when I tell you we were led there by Mick Hervey's ghost."

Jeremy blinked in disbelief.

"Now, look here, see," demanded Tanya, tugging at Adelaide's trousers, while imitating a criminal known as Bugsy Malone. "I need to talk, see."

"Later --"

"No; now, see!" In an effort to drag her friend away, Tanya then pulled at what she thought was the drawstring securing the trousers to Adelaide's waist. Instead, the cord broke free under the stress, and Tanya marched off unaware, gradually pulling the string along with her.

An unknown object, secured to the end of the cord, soon snagged at Adelaide's waist, and she found herself unexpectedly jolted backwards, falling. Electing to save Gig from serious harm, she speedily plucked him from her shoulder, but, her hands consequently occupied, she was then unable to protect herself, and landed roughly upon her still-tender posterior.

As might be expected under the circumstances, she then cursed Tanya -- quite comprehensively.

"Adelaide," interjected Tanya unsuccessfully; Adelaide's barrage of insults continued, uninterrupted.

"Adelaide," interjected Jeremy, also unsuccessfully; Adelaide's barrage of insults still continued, remaining uninterrupted.

"ADELAIDE!" interjected everyone, successfully interrupting Adelaide's barrage of insults.

Tanya held up the object responsible for her friend's abrupt toppling. "Look, Adelaide," she grinned maniacally.

"The key!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

A PIG IN A POKE.

ONCE THEY LOSE THE FEAR OF THEIR GUARDIAN, adolescent guinea pigs typically become quite boisterous.

Mick Hervey learned this sad fact rather poignantly whilst piloting his 'pick-up truck', a motorized vehicle with a small, exposed cargo area, across the Canadian Prairies. He had collected both his mechanized transportation and equine equivalent, that of the stallion Elmore, from a trusted acquaintance, James, in Calgary, after 'hitch-hiking' from Alberta's capital city, Edmonton, several hundred kilometres to the north.

"Aussie, eh? What's that?" asked the kind farmer, who had charitably chosen to offer Mick a ride, of the small burlap sack that his passenger carried.

"It's a pig in a poke," Mick had answered, smiling.

"That's not a snake, is it?" the Samaritan had inquired with some concern.

Mick laughed. "No, no snake. Just a pig in a poke."

To make his point, the sack obligingly wheeled.

"Sure does sound like a pig," said the farmer. "Awful small though."

"He makes up for his size with his voice." Mick grinned.

"That's for sure," the farmer agreed, wholeheartedly.

They would discuss their experiences in the vague terms that strangers do, while travelling to their mutual destination. Eventually, they would arrive, and the time would come to part ways.

Thanking the Samaritan for his aid, Mick had then made his way to James' residence.

"Do I know you?" asked his former friend when presented at his door by the guise of Mick Hervey.

"Alistair told me to see you. He said you'd have some things for me."

"So, where's Alistair, then?"

"He's dead."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

"So am I; so am I. Oh. Sorry to be so rude. Name's Mick. Mick Hervey."

"Well, good to meet you, Mick."

They would sit, and drink coffee; Mick would explain, in generalities, the sad events that had taken place. In the morning, Elmore would be loaded into a trailer, attached to the rear of the truck, and the next stage in Mick's journey would begin.

Meanwhile, several weeks had passed since their rapid departure from Vancouver, and 'Wilbur', the guinea pig to be later known as Gig, was growing quite rapidly. This development would require a great deal of nutrition, and Wilbur was not shy about expressing his needs with some volume, and frequently.

Squirreled away, amongst straw and hay, inside an ancient milk-bottle crate, vegetables would need to be deposited within at regular intervals, lest the cavy cause great discomfort to Mick Hervey's eardrums in the confined passenger space inside the truck.

This was not, however, the only cause for Wilbur's constant complaints.

It soon became evident that the creature suffered from motion sickness, and frequent stops were mandated in an effort to keep Wilbur's protestations from driving Mick Hervey to madness - or, even worse, cavycide. This was especially necessary in that they were to travel for quite some time; to make any effort at tracking the pair especially difficult, Mick would follow an extensive, seemingly haphazard route back and forth, as far east as the Manitoba-Ontario border, and as far north as the edge of the Northwest Territories.

Should anyone attempt to follow them, they would be led on a 'wild goose chase' that, it was hoped, those pursuers would deem impossible to finish, and subsequently abandon.

This went on for several weeks before Mick felt sufficient measures had been taken, and at long last set course for Suffield, their final destination.

He was anxious to see his granddaughter.

Of course, this would happen to be about the time when he would inevitably draw the attention of a traffic enforcement officer.

"Aussie, huh? Where are you headed?" the constable demanded, but politely.

"Winnipeg," Mick lied.

"Bit cold, eh? What's in the crate?" then asked the policeman of the wooden box set next to Mick Hervey.

"It's a pig in a poke," came the reply.

"Bit small for a pig, isn't it? It's not a snake, is it?" inquired the officer, cautiously.

"No, it's no snake. Would you like to see?" Mick's heart pounded, for if the policeman had chosen to look, he might inadvertently inform malevolent forces of the guinea pig's location.

Or, indeed, the policeman might be one of those forces himself.

There was a brief pause for consideration. "Never mind. I'll take your word for it. Miniature pig. Whatever you say."

Happily, Mick was merely verbally chastised for defective signal lamps, and sent on his way once more.

"Safe trip. Don't freeze to death."

"I'll do my best."

Alistair Dennison was a crafty fellow.

He had furtively arranged Peter's purchase of the house in Suffield, a house that he had himself acquired anonymously some years before. Intended as a retreat, for contemplation and

meditation, he had built a banker's desk into the attic, where he could study his research in relative isolation.

When Peter had made his decision to depart Vancouver, he had contacted a real-estate agent that Alistair had introduced him to at a function a year earlier. This person had, of course, been financially encouraged to aggressively recommend a specific property in a particular town -- Peter was not choosy, and accepted the advice without question.

Obviously, Alistair would retain a set of keys.

Mick Hervey arrived in Suffield a few days before Thanksgiving, and took possession of the Feed and Supply store he had purchased by proxy some time earlier. In the interim, the previous owner had stayed on, but as per their generous agreement, vacated the town quietly once Hervey revealed his presence.

Elmore would be boarded at a local stable, and Mick would live in a small, unadorned one-room hut fastened to the rear of the shop, previously a storeroom. A tiny cot, a bureau and a small television furnished one corner of the room; the opposite hosted a wood-fired stove, a small pantry containing a single place-set of dishes, and a clothesline was strung from the ceiling, above.

That would be how it would remain until he died.

As you already know, at the Suffield Community Thanksgiving Dinner, Mick was well received. However, what has not been adequately explained is that a certain resident found herself enamoured with the 'ocker' Australian more than any of the others.

That woman was named Madeline Greensborough.

She was absolutely enraptured -- not merely by his accent or demeanour, but by the man himself. This was love, pure and simple, a feeling she had not felt since the death of her husband some years before. Unfortunately, Mick was a novelty in Suffield, and many sought to capture his attention; this made it difficult for Madeline to spend any significant time with the man for whom her heart pounded just that much faster.

Only when he visited her, at the cash register in her grocery, would she be given any opportunity to converse with the man she loved so dearly; sadly, Madeline was very shy, and said discussion

usually consisted only of small talk and pleasantries. Mick would collect his provisions, typically vegetables and coffee, for he kept chickens behind the Feed and Supply, and had plenty of meat and eggs, then quietly disappear.

In the meantime, he would befriend Adelaide Pemberton, and she would adopt Wilbur, rechristening him Gig. He would be glad to be rid of that raucous creature, but saddened by the emptiness the cavy would leave behind. It was not long before the man craved further companionship, and Missus Greensborough would oblige.

"That'll be ten dollars and forty cents," she would declare, after ringing through his groceries. "And," she blurted, "you must come by for dinner Friday evening."

"Dinner is part of my bill?" Mick replied, with mock astonishment.

"Why, uh," she stammered, "yes. Yes it is. I insist."

He grinned. "Well, you drive a hard bargain. However, I think it would still be a deal even at twice the price."

Timidly: "You'll come, then?"

"For the pleasure of your company?" he spoke, with imitated eloquence, "I wouldn't miss it for anything, madam." A twinkle could be seen in his eye as he collected his grocery sacks, and departed.

Madeline nearly fainted.

Mick would arrive punctually at the appointed hour, dressed in his finest flannelette shirt and a clean pair of denim work pants, flowers in hand. They would drink red wine, and talk the night away. She would tell him of her life, and of the tragedy that befell her husband, the man killed by farming equipment a decade earlier. Madeline had sold their farm, then, and moved into Suffield, purchasing the grocery and the small house in which she presently entertained the Australian she adored.

He told her of his homeland. Mick wished to tell her of how his wife had died of cancer when their daughter was only a few years old, and of how they had left Melbourne for Vancouver, then, fleeing the memories that had haunted him so terribly.

However, he could not.

He had never been married, Mick told her; his life had been spent on cattle 'stations', sweeping ranches in the Australian outback. Only recently did he decide that he required a 'change of pace', leaving his home for Suffield, Saskatchewan, and the Feed and Supply.

It broke his heart to lie, since he loved her as well, but could not bring himself to admit it, not even to Mick Hervey.

Oh, how he must have missed Melbourne! Visions of hot air balloons, high in the sky of early morning, looking down upon the streetcars, far below, would chronically infest his dreams, and almost give him cause to regret his decision every time he would wake.

Instead, he would briefly remember his wife, and then resume his mental vigilance, remembering Australia as a place he despised for many reasons, all falsehoods.

Thankfully, this would happen progressively less often the more he visited with Madeline Greensborough.

It became a weekly affair, those dinners together, lasting late into the evening. They would play games based on numbered cards, graced with images of royalty, and watch motion pictures recorded upon lengthy strips of cellophane, huddled together for warmth on Missus Greensborough's sofa.

In this fashion, Alistair Dennison made a grave error.

He ought to have known better, and did. As a young man, he had been a member of the elite Australian Special Air Service, and had been taught what is perhaps the most important rule with regards to maintaining a manufactured persona.

That is, one should never have an intimate relationship.

This is not a simple reference to sexuality, although that is certainly often involved. No, in this case 'intimate' refers to that sort of bonding that results in extensive scrutiny -- the greatest enemy of any attempt at façade.

"Is Adelaide your granddaughter?" It was an innocent question.

Mick Hervey's expression froze, as if turned to granite.

"Is she?" Madeline persisted.

"What in the world would give you that foolish idea?" he finally retorted, angrily.

"Calm down, Mick. It's just that you seem to have a bit more than a casual interest in her; I thought she might be family."

"No, she isn't. I mean -- no. She isn't." He stood up, then, from Madeline's dining table, collected his overcoat, and left without saying one word further.

Needless to say, Madeline did not believe him.

She would watch both Mick and Adelaide over the coming week, while the man agonized over lying yet again to one he held so dear, and the girl was completely oblivious to any of it.

There would be no dinner on the Friday following, nor the one after that.

Saturday morning arrived, and Madeline paid a visit to the Feed and Supply, where familial joviality would be observed between her subjects until the moment at which the elder of the two noticed her presence, and he then became cold, distant.

He must have a good reason for wishing to conceal his relations, Madeline thought; indeed, she had been a fool for insisting upon pursuing the issue any further, and she was lonely again in consequence. When he wished to inform her of such matters, he would.

She told him so, in a letter that she surreptitiously deposited in his grocery bag during the next available opportunity.

Friday night came around once more, and she would habitually prepare a meal for two, as she had even on those prior occasions where she had dined alone.

However, this time, happily, he would arrive, unspeaking but present, and eat with her. She made no attempt at discussion, grateful enough for his attendance.

The following week, he would visit again, still mute, at least until dessert.

Perhaps Madeline's famous apple pie prompted his speech; it was as good an explanation as any.

"Yes, Adelaide is my granddaughter," he admitted, his accent that of Alistair Dennison. "You mustn't mention this to anyone, not even her father, for he does not know of this either."

Missus Greensborough moved to speak, but he raised his hand.

"I cannot give you any other details. There are forces at work that would see us all come to a premature end, and knowing any more could place you in danger. I won't have that."

She nodded.

"So, please don't ask me any additional questions; it pains me to lie to you, and I will not do that again." He kissed her gently on the cheek, collected his coat, and departed early, without another word.

No more would be said regarding that issue, and normality would resume. Mick Hervey would come around for Friday supper, and then they would sit and watch motion pictures, or play games with numbered cards, graced with images of Kings and Queens.

She would observe separate, heated arguments, each at a distance, on a fateful Wednesday afternoon, between Mick and two individuals that Madeline soon came to despise, one Caucasian and one African.

On Thursday morning, the second and last man she would ever love was found dead, but she would not know until Friday, and he would not attend her for dinner, then or forever.

Constable Henderson would be the one to inform her, and she would collapse in tears, incoherent and unable to tell him of what she had witnessed. It would not be until Sunday that she would speak with him, and recall the details of the arguments to the policeman; however, no foul play could be detected at the scene of Mick Hervey's death, and it had clearly been an accident.

Madeline insisted the constable look again, and he would; the same verdict would be rendered, and the distraught woman would demand yet another review. Joe would comply with her request, but only one time more; no clues would reveal themselves

to indicate that the incident was anything more than unfortunate circumstance. Both suspects were declared exonerated.

She would withdraw, then, and retreat within herself, unable to reconcile what had happened with her failure to obtain justice for it.

Frustration festered inside of her, blooming like yeast in a warm, sugary fluid, until she could contain it no longer, and, on All Hallows Eve, chose to visit the one she had become convinced had undertaken the vile deed of terminating Mick Hervey's life, and condemned her to loneliness once more.

This man would make no admissions, and she would leave 'empty-handed', with no satisfaction.

Then, later that evening, she would fall victim to, what appeared on the surface to be, a burglar.

Madeline Greensborough was dead.

BURGLARY ENDS IN MURDER

TRAVELLERS SUSPECTED IN DEATH.

by Mark Matthews, The Suffield Advertiser
November 2nd, 2012

SUFFIELD, SK (CP) -- UNDER COVER OF HALLOWE'EN FIREWORKS, an unknown assailant or assailants forced entry into a middle-aged Suffield woman's home last evening.

In what local Royal Canadian Mounted Police constable Joseph Henderson describes as 'a robbery gone wrong', it appears they mistook the house for being unoccupied, and were surprised by the resident, beloved local Madeline Greensborough, proprietor of the local grocery.

"It looks like there was quite a struggle, but she couldn't fend him off," said Constable Henderson of the incident. "Eventually, he hit her on the head, and crushed her skull."

She was found dead late yesterday morning. After she failed to open her business, a regular customer, Peter Pemberton, went to her house to determine if something was wrong.

"She was just lying there," he said. "There was blood everywhere. It was horrible."

Coming on the heels of the death of another respected local, Australian ex-patriot Mick Hervey, Suffield is reeling from the double-blow.

A memorial service is expected to be held for both residents later this week.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

INTUITION.

ADELAIDE HAD SOME INTERESTING BEDTIME READING awaiting her upon her return home.

Following the discovery of the key, she had not rushed.

In typical fashion, Tanya had failed to grant the discretion the delicate matter deserved, and Adelaide would be forced to discount and discredit her friend's 'wild imagination' as nothing more than exaggerated fantasy.

Tanya was not pleased with this, and stormed off.

Truthfully, in her heart, Adelaide knew that Mick Hervey would not have gone to such lengths for any ordinary secret; there must be something particularly unique about the contents of that desk for him to make such extraordinary efforts.

Therefore, it would be unwise to thwart his endeavour by drawing the interest of others.

As such, she would need to remain at the Halloween party until it dwindled to naught but her, Jeremy and Michael, the latter eventually asking -- politely -- for his loitering guests to depart.

"Where have you been?" demanded Peter, visibly nervous and agitated, when his daughter finally made her tardy entrance.

"At a party. I left a note."

Indeed she had, upon the refrigerator, the obvious location but one that Peter had failed to inspect.

Unsatisfied, Peter lodged a further complaint. "Why didn't you answer your cellular phone?"

"I forgot it."

"Oh, well, I guess that makes purchasing it all the more worthwhile."

Adelaide was not terribly fond of his antagonism. "Where," she countered, "were you?"

"What do you mean?" he retorted, defensively. "I've been here."

"Since when?" she probed.

He became flustered. "Just after you left."

"And when was that?"

"Look, Adelaide, I don't need to justify my movements to you. But, you do to me."

"Double standard."

"Yes. Now go to bed."

Thankfully, Peter had obviously not looked too closely at the state of Adelaide's room, or, more specifically, the hole torn in the ceiling and the fragments of plaster on the floor. Had he, he might have been more troublesome, but happily, his daughter was able to retreat unhindered.

She placed Gig into his house, admonishing him to mind his manners -- and his voice box. Quietly, cautiously she then removed the ladder from her closet, where she had hidden it, and made muted haste for the attic, eager to reveal the contents of the banker's desk stationed above.

The first drawer was empty, as was the second. The third was similarly vacant, and Adelaide was understandably disappointed.

She retreated, down to her bedroom, and lay upon her bed, face down due to the discomfort of her tailbone, and mulled the mystery that remained unsolved. Something straightforward, simple and inelegant was 'staring her in the face'; the knowledge that the solution was likely less-than-ingenious only annoyed the amateur detective even further.

Something must be behind a drawer. Her enthusiasm reignited by her conclusion, she flew up the ladder, and pulled the desk apart, yielding nothing.

Adelaide searched every nook and cranny, hoping to uncover a shred of paper, a pencil scrawl, any clue with which to continue her investigation, but there was none.

Back down she went once more, to resume her rumination. Soon, she began to doze, lightly.

"It's a red herring," said Sherlock Holmes, master detective, on the late-night teleplay Adelaide had turned to when her thought process failed her.

"What, dear Holmes," asked Watson, "is a 'red herring'?"

"A red herring," Holmes explained, "is a misdirection. A clue that is intended to lead one off of the chase, and confound deduction."

"I see. So the boot imprint is a red herring."

"Yes," agreed Holmes. "We are intended to assume that the perpetrator traversed the window, when indeed he did not. Our quarry had access to the house, and did not need to enter in such a manner."

"An 'inside job'."

"Good, Watson," Holmes laughed. "Very good!"

Adelaide awoke with a brilliant thought -- the key was a red herring! Therefore, what she sought was not in the desk.

Once again she mounted the ladder, and found herself in the attic. If what Mick Hervey intended for her to find was there, and it was not in the desk, it certainly wasn't obvious at first glance. She rummaged through the sack of random clothes, inspecting each garment scrupulously, praying for a discovery, but she would have no such success.

The rafters were oddly devoid of even cobwebs, and the walls were unfinished, a skeleton of boards displaying their transparent nakedness -- there were no secrets there.

Defeated and exhausted, Adelaide curled up on the floor of the attic, and, using the sack of clothes as a pillow, cried herself to sleep.

She would have nightmares, then, of Mick Hervey in a desperate struggle with evil governments and cruel assassins. Adelaide saw his death at the hands of Albert Johnson, the man she had become convinced was one of those clandestine operatives, and who was presently seeking the same information she was -- the last testament of Mick Hervey.

It was behind the desk.

The key was the red herring, not the desk. She roused abruptly, and groggily pulled at the huge banker's desk, slowly moving it away from the wall, a fraction of a centimetre at a time until she could reach her arm down in the resultant gap, and explore by sense of touch -- carefully.

She found a book. At least, it felt like one. Fastened to the back of the desk with some sort of mild adhesive, it came free with little effort and was soon in the excited young woman's possession.

Sitting down on the floor, she crossed her legs, and opened the cover.

It was another ledger.

This one had a series of dates and values, all carefully recorded using various implements, pencils and pens of many colours -- but it was a fraud, further redundancy to distract unwanted eyes from what was hidden there, the base-26 words the numbers represented.

In sequential order were the following dollar values:

\$3,571.81, \$2.53, \$2,172.87, \$3.37, \$137.33, \$2,121.02, \$83,222.71, \$2,525.19, \$123.01, \$106.12, \$3.96, \$137.33, \$416.29, \$4,417.45, \$2,937.84, \$34.78.

To one uneducated, these might seem to be deposits to a secret account, or payments for illicit services rendered. Adelaide was not so ignorant.

To her, they read: "THIS IS LIKE LY THE LAST REMAINING RECORD OF THE BIOCYCLE PROJECT."

"Biocycle Project?" she asked herself, intrigued. She continued decoding.

Apparently, Mick Hervey had led a previous life as a scientist -- a biologist. The ledger claimed that his team had invented an organic mechanism for converting plastics into petroleum that could then be burnt cleanly, as a source of energy.

Unfortunately, Adelaide's fears were soon confirmed.

\$10.00, \$3.96, \$137.33, \$3,549.39, \$11.49, \$737.14, \$3,351.97, \$3.63, \$3,376.42.

"ALL OF THE TEAM ARE DEAD SAVE MY SELF," declared the ledger.

The younger members of the human species love to fantasize about involvement in danger, and will not hesitate when jeopardy is uncertain; however, they are not quite so bold when such peril is plainly evident. This was the transition Adelaide promptly made, for her enthusiasm rapidly waned, to be swiftly replaced with trepidation -- and fear.

Then, she read that Gig was purportedly the end product of that research, and key to the future salvation of the world.

Adelaide felt a great deal of relief.

Old Mick was insane. The idea that Gig was some furry, four-legged chemical laboratory was completely absurd -- even a grade-school student could firmly arrive at that conclusion with little consideration.

There was no need to be afraid; Albert Johnson was no assassin, and Mick Hervey's death had, in truth, been an accident.

The case was closed.

Satisfied, she returned below, to her bed with its usual comfort relative in the face of her maligned backside, and slept peacefully, with no disruptions, until morning, when Gig would loudly wheek his call for breakfast.

Collecting her wanting pig, she would eagerly descend the stairs, oddly refreshed and prepared for the day ahead. Cheerfully whistling, she would prepare toasted bread, spread with jellied fruit, and Gig would partake of some lettuce, while Rumsfeld, having spent the night under the kitchen table, ate his morning kibble.

Peter could not be convinced to emerge from the study; not even the promise of coffee would spur him to wakefulness. He growled at Adelaide to leave him be, and allow him to sleep. She was surprised by his rude behaviour, but not sufficiently perturbed to dampen the brightness of her sunny outlook.

Adelaide, Gig and Rumsfeld would soon depart for school.

"I'm not speaking to you," barked Tanya, meeting Adelaide at her usual entrance, before turning sharply and quick-marching away.

"If you say so," replied Adelaide needlessly, as the recipient of her reply was far out of earshot. Tanya had a right to be upset. Adelaide had humiliated her best friend over an old man's fantasy, and deserved to be punished for it. She only hoped that Tanya would find it within herself to forgive in short order.

"Perhaps you're right," said Cougar, to Eagle the following morning, after a great deal of reflection on the cat's part. "Maybe it's best to allow some time for healing, before making any rash decisions that might escalate things further."

Eagle was pleased that Cougar had come to see reason. "You won't be sorry. I'm sure those who wronged us were an exception, and no rule. The humans will discipline their own, and we will stay safe."

Although still tempered with a small amount of suspicion, Cougar was content to surrender to the enticement of Eagle's optimism, having found no solace in his anger and distrust. "I leave the next move to the Spirits," he declared, satisfied to permit them a chance to prove Eagle correct.

"Adelaide!" snapped the Spirits. "What can we calculate with the formula 'pi times r squared'?"

Distracted by the forest creatures, Adelaide mumbled. "But, pie aren't square, they're round."

The Mathematics classroom burst into laughter and jeers.

Returned to reality, Adelaide responded in the only appropriate fashion. She rose, and took a bow.

“Yes, yes,” said Missus Auburn, “we’ve all heard that one before. How about this one, Adelaide? One hour’s detention after school. Is that funny enough for you?”

Adelaide wrinkled her nose in disapproval and sat down again, on her coccyx cushion, and attempted to spare herself from any further discipline.

Lunch arrived, and although Tanya persisted in her disassociation, Jeremy, for the first time in many years, joined Adelaide for the mid-day meal, fuelling rampant gossip amongst their schoolmates.

“I never took Mick to be that type,” said Jeremy, after he had been apprised of recent discoveries.

“What ‘type’, crazy?”

“I guess. I mean, he was always so level-headed. Someone you could look up to, and count on.”

Adelaide sighed. “I know exactly what you mean. People aren’t always what they seem.”

“Does Tanya know?”

“As you can plainly see, she’s not speaking to me.”

Jeremy grunted. “I’m sure she’ll get over it.”

“Have you?”

“What, with Johnson? Yeah, I’ve decided to let bygones be bygones and give him another chance. Maybe it was just as he said, an innocent mistake. Can’t really condemn a man for one transgression, now can we?”

In fact, Physical Education was quite pleasant. Mister Johnson was quite cordial, and no confrontations were to be had by any of the players in our particular tale that day, although Tanya would still refuse to hear the words of Adelaide Pemberton.

School would conclude, Adelaide would serve out her time in detention, and then depart, one hour later than usual, to return home by way of the grocery, where she intended to acquire dietary frivolity such as sugar-sweetened water and potatoes deep-fried in oil.

The grocery was dark.

Adelaide's intuition had very little to say to ward of a quick return of the darkness that had blackened her mental landscape for the previous few weeks, and instead wholeheartedly encouraged it.

She ran home, with Rumsfeld galloping along beside her, and met Jeremy, in his snow-covered garden chopping wood. He would say nothing, but merely lower his head in sadness, shaking it from side to side in disbelief. Adelaide would dash inside, to her father, and receive no better news. Madeline Greensborough, Mick Hervey's closest friend, was dead, murdered in her own home.

Perhaps Mick was not quite so insane after all.

"Never feed Gig plastic," he had warned her. "It could make him very sick, and he could die. Promise me you'll never do it."

"I promise," swore the young Adelaide, "I will never let Gig eat plastic."

"Cross your heart and hope to die?"

"Cross my heart," she managed to repeat, before he began to tickle her senseless.

"Hey, that's not fair," she screamed, running away.

The advice given in the ledger was, of course, to feed Gig plastic, contrary to Mick's earlier recommendation, and in violation of Adelaide's pledge. There was, however, no other way to prove Hervey's sanity.

There would be a memorial service held the next evening, for both Madeline Greensborough and Mick Hervey -- the town had decided that two citizens were worth the effort where one was not.

Tanya would continue to avoid Adelaide throughout the intervening school day, while the latter would attempt to resolve the contradiction that plagued her mind, of whether or not to place her beloved guinea pig in potential peril. Jeremy still erred on the side of doubt, unconvinced that Madeline's death validated Mick's encrypted manifesto, but this was not enough to sway Adelaide to that conclusion. She needed Tanya's advice.

Tanya would be present at the memorial, and Adelaide used the occasion to sneak up upon her estranged friend, and whisper an

apology before she could run off. Although her face grew red with anger, not even Tanya would make a scene at such a mournful event, and she stayed her ground.

Her emotions soon subsided, and she agreed to hear Adelaide out.

“So, feed the plastic to the pig,” was Tanya’s opinion.

“Are you sure? Aren’t you worried about him?”

“Nah. He’s a pretty tough little guy. I think the worst that would happen is he’d just poop it out the way it was. I saw a cat that ate a plastic bag once; it was sticking out of his butt.” Tanya laughed under her breath.

“So you don’t believe Mick then?”

“I don’t know what to believe,” she sighed. “Maybe he was crazy, maybe he wasn’t, but the one thing I am sure of is that a little plastic isn’t going to kill piggy. If you don’t believe me, ask the Internet.”

Following the subsequent, pointless discussion, taking place over little cakes, that typically occurred at these sorts of ceremonies, Tanya and Adelaide would return to the Pemberton house, where they would ask the computer if feeding Gig plastic could be a lethal experiment, to which the ‘technological wonder’ replied in the negative.

He would most likely have no interest in eating such things at all.

Reassured by the encouraging verdict of her electronic advisor, Adelaide offered Gig the brittle lid from a less-than-‘disposable’ yoghurt container, and he idly chewed upon it for several hours, whilst two young women, his guardian and greatest admirer, each waited to see if absurdity would transpire, and then become reality.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

AN UNSAVOURY BUSINESS.

IT WAS THE HOWLING OF THE DAMNED.

Constable Henderson pulled the hood of his parka tight about his head in an effort to protect himself from the sharp, tiny crystals of ice -- loosely defined as 'snow' -- that battered the officer relentlessly. Battery depleted, his rugged police motorcar, a friendlier version of a contemporary military-transport vehicle, had failed to engage in internal combustion, and instead relegated the man to the cruel misery of the elements.

If asked, Joe would don a mask of bravado, and insist that he was not bothered; after all, he was 'prairie born-and-bred', weathered and seasoned. Truthfully, though, he would have much rather been inside the motorcar's comfortably heated cabin, but circumstances were as they were, and he had work to do.

Walking across the bleak, monochromatic landscape, he attempted to prepare himself for what he would soon encounter. Peter Pemberton had contacted him by telephone minutes earlier; his tone held concern but was oddly detached, matter-of-fact -- almost clinical.

"Hello," Joe had greeted his caller cheerily.

"Madeline Greensborough is dead," came the unnervingly straightforward reply.

"Peter? Is that you?"

"Yes. The grocery was still closed when I arrived there earlier, and so I went to see if she was okay. She is not." There was a pause.

Disbelief was thick in Joe's voice. "I'll head right over there."

"Okay. I should warn you, it's a bit of a mess."

"Are you there now?"

"No," said Peter with little inflection. "I'm on my way home. If you need me, I'll be available later."

"Okay." Joe understood the trauma Peter must have suffered, and his need for personal reflection. "Just call me again when you're ready."

"Thanks, Joe."

"Don't mention it." He had replaced the handset into its cradle, collected his winter-appropriate garmentry, and then departed with little procrastination.

The front door to the Greensborough residence was securely locked, but the rear entrance was not, having been obviously forced open. It was ajar, and snow was blowing into the back porch-way, collecting in a drift next to a clothes-washing machine.

Wielding a rather weighty electric torch, the constable proceeded cautiously inside, steeling himself for the possibility that a perpetrator still lurked within. Although Peter had not distinctly indicated that Madeline had befallen tragedy at the hands of others, it was implied in his voice -- Constable Henderson had quite the talent for detecting such nuances.

However, this was the first time he had exercised that ability in such a macabre context.

There had never been a murder in Suffield. You might consider this an irrationally broad statement; after all, the history of the Canadian west is quite colourful, rife with American whisky runners, railway thugs and soldiers who committed various atrocities against the indigenous population, but as a matter of public record, no fatal act of violence had ever occurred within the town's boundaries since its initial settlement.

Mick Hervey's demise had come dangerously close to being the first.

It was Thursday. "Son, I need you to work with me tomorrow, instead of school."

Jeremy raised an eyebrow, his left one, leaving his right one undisturbed in a disturbing demonstration of advanced coordination. "Why?"

"You know I hate it when you do that. It's weird."

They laughed.

"Seriously, though," Joe continued, taking a deep breath and exhaling an equally profound expression, "I need your help over at the Feed and Supply. I don't trust anyone else."

"I thought that was an accident?"

Joe grimaced. "I wouldn't mind a second opinion. Also, your stomach is stronger than mine."

"Mop up on aisle ten', huh?" Jeremy grinned. He was a bit of an aficionado of 'horror' pictures, and had become inured to the graphic violence portrayed within them. Joe, on the other hand, had a more delicate constitution when it came to such matters.

"Something like that," Joe confirmed.

"Okay," Jeremy agreed jovially, good nature concealing the alarm caused by his father's veiled admission. That he desired his son's opinion implied that he was far less than certain Mick had died by chance, and Joe was not typically an indecisive man.

Constable Henderson stood quietly in the doorway to Madeline Greensborough's ransacked kitchen, and listened intently for any sign he was not alone. Several minutes passed, marked by the cadence of the clock mounted upon the wall, with no indication that anyone else was present -- at least, living.

Then, to his great alarm, the constable realized that someone, or something, was descending the stairs from the second floor.

"So," concluded Jeremy, "the shelving collapsed, and then he was knocked down by the bags of seed. Falling backwards, he hit his head on the opposite shelf, and died."

"That's sure what it looks like." The blood smeared about did tend to indicate that was indeed how Mick met his end.

"So, what's the problem?"

"How tall was Mick?"

"Tall. Six feet, four inches maybe."

“Right,” agreed Joe. “So, how does a six foot, four inch tall man fall backwards, and bash his skull against the edge of a shelf that’s only four feet behind him?”

“He should have caught it with his shoulders.”

Joe nodded. “That’s what I thought, too.”

“So, you think it was foul play, then?”

The constable scratched his chin. “I can’t rule it out.” They stood quietly for a few moments, before Joe told Jeremy of a further complication. “There’s also”, he added, “the matter of Peter Pemberton.”

Someone was descending Madeline Greensborough’s stairs, from the second floor. He was not a heavy individual -- footfalls were quite light and airy -- and before the constable was able to steady himself, his feline adversary had already advanced into the kitchen, directly attacking the bowl of kibble sat upon the floor.

Pushing his heart from his throat back to the place it was meant to inhabit, Joe carried forth.

She was in her living room, on the floor in front of her mantle. Blood soaked the carpet around her, and a large clay vase lay beside her, broken in two. The electronic devices customary to such a room were missing, hastily removed, as were the silver and gold statuettes that Constable Henderson had noted when he had called upon her previously.

“Mick was arguing with that man. Albert Johnson, I believe his name is. They were out in front of the Feed and Supply -- I had stepped outside from the grocery to assist poor old Missus Phelps to her car when I saw them. I swear, Mick was this close to hitting Albert. Things were quite heated.

“Then, they saw me, staring at them, and Albert turned, walking away. Mick just gave me a look, like I should mind my own business, and then went back inside. I thought that it was probably just a simple customer dispute, and returned into my own shop.”

Mucklefoot, the calico, had jumped up upon Joe’s lap then, demanding affection from he who dared intrude upon his domain.

“That’s probably just what it was,” Joe assured her.

"Well, I would have thought nothing further of it, except that about an hour later, when I was helping little old Missus Riversdale, I witnessed Mick arguing with someone else. I couldn't be sure, because I only saw them from the back, but I think it was --"

His telephone rang, then, frightening off poor Mucklefoot, and interrupting Missus Greensborough's testimony. "Missus Phelps has fallen, and broken her ankle," he explained, after the call had finished. "The ambulance is out on another call, so I need to drive her to the hospital. Can I come back later?"

"Of course," said Madeline, "I understand." She showed him to the door.

"Are you sure," she asked him then, before permitting him to exit, "that Mick's death was an accident?"

"It would appear to be the case."

"I see," she said, obviously unsatisfied. "Would you look again?"

"Missus Greensborough, there's no evidence of any foul play --"

"Please, humour me," she begged, on the verge of tears.

Unwilling to cause her any further distress, Joe had quickly agreed.

"What about Peter?" asked Jeremy, confused.

"Mick left the Feed and Supply to him."

"Really? I mean, I know Mick was fond of Adelaide and stuff, but that does still seem strange. I don't think Peter would kill Mick for his hay, though." Jeremy grinned at his own inappropriate levity.

Joe glared at him. "Have some respect."

"I was just kidding."

"Death is never something to joke about."

No truer words could have ever been spoken about the scene Joe presently witnessed, that of Madeline Greensborough sprawled

out on the floor, her face portraying her final moment, plainly one of fear and pain. It almost appeared as if one was meant to believe that the vase had fallen accidentally, for it seemed a strange place for such a violent confrontation.

You would expect her to have challenged an intruder at some point between her bedroom upstairs and the back porch, not in front of her fireplace.

However, she had been robbed. This point was not in dispute. Every room had been searched, and anything of value had been removed. The perpetrators had presumably loaded their ill-gotten gains into a vehicle, and then fled.

The implication was that they were not from Suffield, but rather rogue travellers, randomly targeting a resident's home as they passed through.

It was a strange coincidence, though.

"Still, if that's the only motive you have, it's pretty flimsy."

Joe nodded at his son in agreement. "You're probably right. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense."

Peter had been the one to discover Madeline Greensborough, a fact that unsettled the constable who was investigating her untimely demise.

"Still," Joe had remarked, that Friday before Thanksgiving, "I get the feeling there's something we don't know, but until I know what that is, there's nothing more to do."

Madeline Greensborough would contact Joe on the following Sunday, and insist that he come by, for she had something urgent to tell him.

"I saw Madeline and -- what is that new guy's name? Oh yes, Albert Johnson -- arguing yesterday afternoon, inside her store." Peter had collected himself, and paid Joe a visit that evening, after the constable had returned from investigating the Greensborough murder.

"Are you sure it was Johnson?"

"He's hard to miss, isn't he?" Given the context of Suffield, Saskatchewan, it is hard to dispute Peter's logic. "Anyway, they didn't know I was there; I was hiding in the back."

"What were they saying?"

Peter took a sip from his tin of beer. "Madeline thought that Johnson might have had something to do with Mick's death."

"He disagreed."

"Oh yes, and vehemently too. He told her she was crazy, paranoid and that she should find other things to do with her time."

"I can't imagine Madeline took that well."

"That's an understatement. She slapped him."

Joe looked surprised. "On the face?"

"No, on his wrist. Of course his face."

"I can't imagine Johnson took that well."

"No, it's safe to say they were mutually dissatisfied."

Albert Johnson took issue with Peter's recollection.

"He's crazy, paranoid and should find other things to do with his time," he said. "Shouldn't you be looking at him, anyway?"

"What makes you say that?"

"I saw him leave Madeline's place last night," Albert declared as if it were gospel truth.

Joe's eyes narrowed. "And why were you there?"

"I was taking a jog."

"Wasn't it twenty below last night?" asked the incredulous officer.

"I like running in the cold. It's good for the cardiovascular system. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go around again."

"Okay. One more question. You went home after your run?"

“Here is where I started, and here is where I finished.”

Constable Henderson would permit Johnson to depart, then, and strengthen his own alibi by jogging through Suffield in the biting winter cold. In his defence, Joe noted that Albert’s vehicle was heavily entrenched in snow, and could not have been used to cart off Madeline Greensborough’s possessions.

Peter had, of course, been out earlier that day, and his motorcar could not be removed from suspicion.

“Was your Dad home the other night? On Halloween?” asked Jeremy, visiting with Adelaide in her bedroom the following evening, on the second story of the Pemberton house.

“He was here when we came back from the party,” Adelaide answered, referring to herself and Gig. “He wasn’t here when we left though,” with Tanya. “Why?”

“Just covering all the bases.”

Tanya was there; they were conducting a dubious science experiment. “Wait a minute,” she gasped, in over-exaggerated shock. “You think -- No, you couldn’t think that. Seriously, have you met her Dad?”

“Yeah. And you’re waiting for a guinea pig to poop petroleum.”

“Frankly, I find that more believable.”

“Yeah, but you’re you, Tanya.”

“And proud of it!”

Adelaide interjected. “What makes you think my Dad had anything to do with it?”

“Johnson says he saw Peter come out from Madeline’s house.”

“Now there’s credibility if I ever saw it,” said Adelaide, with dour sarcasm.

Gig idly chewed on the plastic yoghurt container lid.

Jeremy held up his hands, palms outward. “Look, I’m not taking sides here; I’m just helping my Dad.”

Tanya spoke up. "I thought you hated Ajax?"

"I'm over it."

"Really? Mahatma Ghandi is in the house!" she laughed. "Say, how long does it take for a guinea pig to digest something?"

"Ask the Internet," replied Jeremy and Adelaide in chorus. Tanya went to do so.

On the yoghurt container's plastic lid, Gig chewed, idly.

"So, Adelaide found this ledger behind a desk in her attic, that she says was full of a secret code that Mick taught her. She claims it says Mick Hervey was some sort of scientist, and genetically engineered guinea pigs to turn plastic into fuel."

Joe had nothing with which to respond to his son's bizarre tale.

"To prove it, they're feeding a plastic yoghurt container's lid to Gig, so they can see if he'll make little petroleum jelly pellets. Crazy, huh?"

Jeremy's father spoke, carefully. "Adelaide thinks someone killed Mick over this?"

"She hasn't said that, but I bet that's what she's thinking."

"I see. This is definitely an 'unsavoury business'."

"Dad, have you been reading those detective novels again?"

The night would wear on. Adelaide and Tanya anxiously awaited the by-product of Gig's strange meal, while Jeremy sat in his room and battled against his electronic enemies. Albert Johnson worked to regain feeling in his frostbitten ears, and Peter Pemberton drank his alcohol with reckless abandon, afraid for his future.

In the small hours of the early morning, there would be a rap against Jeremy's window, waking the young man from his slumber, a nightmare in which he was being chased by an assailant he could not see. Rousing, Jeremy found Adelaide and Tanya, visibly excited, holding what appeared to be little caplets of gelatine.

"You're messing with me, aren't you?" pleaded Jeremy, praying that what he expected them to say, they did not, but his request for the world to remain a safe, sane place would be denied.

The pellets burned a bright blue flame, with no visible smoke or putrid scent. Not until there was nothing left did the blaze falter or wane; it was as Mick Hervey had so boldly claimed. Adelaide and Tanya celebrated, for the old Australian was posthumously vindicated.

Conversely, Jeremy was sternly apprehensive. One could no longer ignore the nefarious nature of recent events. It had become of a far greater likelihood that the deaths of Mick Hervey and Madeline Greensborough were more directly related to this peculiar miracle than not, and they were all in danger for involving themselves with it.

They would soon all wish they had never had anything to do with Mick Hervey.

"Way to rain on our parade," sneered Tanya, not fond of Jeremy's position.

"I'm just being realistic. Two people have died, and over what? Guinea pig poop?"

"Don't you dare minimize the value of Gig," retorted Adelaide, proud of her beloved pet's accomplishment. "He could change the world."

"It appears someone doesn't want that to happen."

"I place my bets on Ajax," said Tanya.

"Yeah," agreed Adelaide, without hesitation.

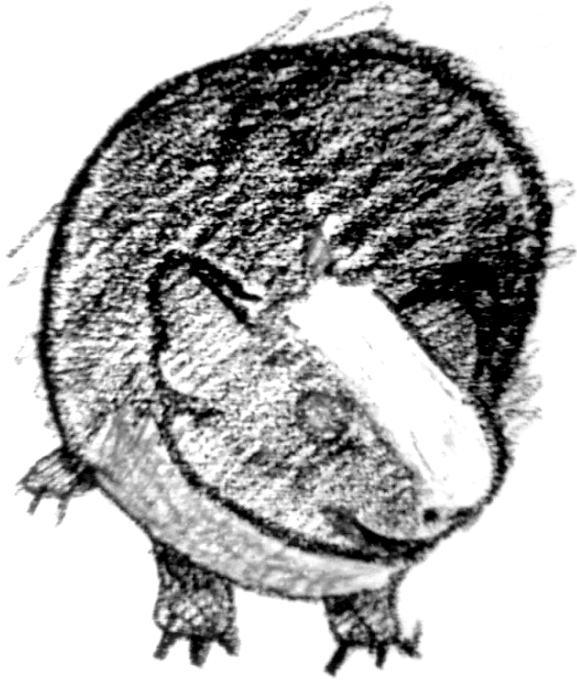
Jeremy furrowed his brow, and thought.

"Yeah," agreed Jeremy, after some deliberation. "The question is, what happens now?"

None knew the answer to that most important of queries, for there were no longer any certainties. In consequence, there would be little sleep that night for all but Peter, comatose from spirits on the floor of his makeshift study.

Given the present circumstances, it might just be that he had the right idea, after all.

END OF PART ONE.



INTERLUDE ONE:

A CUP OF TEA.

“REVISIONIST POPPYCOCK,” HE DECLARED, while waving his hand over the crystal tablet, and wiping his slate clean.

Judith bit her tongue in a hard-fought effort to keep propriety. “Why, dear sir, do you say such a thing?”

The old man leaned back in the wool-stuffed chair, and twirled his moustache in thought whilst the water clock dripped ponderously away. “You editorialise and dramatise far too much for an academic work.”

“I’m merely ‘filling in the blanks’, as those of that time formerly said. Also, those charges are not revisionism, they are merely artistic licence.” Judith folded her arms.

He grunted, throwing his hands in the air. “It’s a quibbling matter.”

“No, it’s not, Bernard. Revisionism would be if I turned Adelaide into a forty year-old man, or made Rumsfeld a goat. I have done no such things.”

Bernard sighed. “Have it your way, madam. However, I’m sure the committee will see your work as I do, and in that regard you should have little hope for it.”

“What would you prefer?” demanded Judith angrily. “Another dry, clinical attempt to explain events as if these people were automatons and not human?”

“Arguably, they were.”

Judith harrumphed. “Now, that is revisionist history.”

“No, Judith; it is an established truth that human beings before the Fall had inferior brain structures, and were incapable of advanced rational thought. This is not conjecture, this is scientific fact.”

"Scientific fact' indeed. You dug a bunch of shrivelled brains out of the ground, a ghastly business I might say, came up with some convoluted mathematical formula and manufactured additional evidence to support your pre-established conclusion."

"Be careful, madam. Your insistence upon personifying these historical characters borders on heresy, and that is not a position you will be content that you have placed yourself in."

Judith sat quietly, with nothing further to say -- for the moment. The water clock dripped studiously away inside her mud-brick hut, set one meter into the ground, while a bed of coals glowed in the hearth, warming a kettle of water set upon an iron grate above it.

Like a good hostess, she then offered her guest a cup of steeped-root tea.

The Honourable Bernard Hotham, chairman of the Committee for Academic Oversight, accepted the brew graciously, and sipped it quietly while the verbal stalemate continued. Minutes passed and, his tea completed, he rose to make his customary departure pleasantries, and then carry on his way.

However, before he traversed the hut's main entrance, he paused, for he had one thing further to say.

"You should know, madam, that our 'ghastly business' of excavation has recently unearthed, and evaluated the remains of one individual subsequently identified as both 'Andrew Jackson' and 'Albert Johnson'."

Judith was, and quite rightly so, taken aback. "You've done what? You cut him up? Are you insane? Have you completely lost your mind?"

Bernard pleaded for calm. "Please madam, compose yourself! If I were you, I would choose my actions carefully, for the practice you so vocally deplore has discovered an important piece of information, one you are certain to require."

She ceased her browbeating and simply glared at him, unspeaking, and awaited his purported revelation. For disturbing such a valued relic, she hoped that, for Bernard's sake, it was of the greatest import.

“It appears he had a tumour of the brain.”

Judith gasped. “Did it kill him?”

“No, he died due to the reason previously ascertained. However, were he aware of his malady, it would go far in explaining his obvious distraction. I will have the details sent over to you shortly.”

She adopted the visage of one elated for one brief moment before resuming her previous disgruntled expression. “Nevertheless, I still cannot approve of your methods, Bernard.”

“No,” he sighed, “and I do not expect that to ever change. Good day, madam.”

“Good day, sir.”

PART TWO

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:

THE SERPENT STRIKES.

ALBERT WAS FINDING HIS PATIENCE TO BE GROWING RATHER THIN.

Sarah Auburn had spent the last several minutes detailing the minutiae regarding what she claimed were examples of aberrant behaviour on the part of her pupils. This was a popular pastime of hers; her audience, that of the faculty sequestered in the 'teacher's lounge', was effectively a captive one -- unwilling to risk having their valuable period of solace disrupted by the intrusion of a student, they had no choice but to listen to another emotional-adolescent.

It was not just the ravings of a schoolteacher that wore on Albert's nerves, however. Of course, there was the pesky matter of the guinea pig, the one that for all intents and purposes was invisible to him. He knew it was there; he knew it deep in his liver. What frustrated him most of all was that, although Albert was certain no one was aware of his true motives, some collective intuition had seemingly led the community at large to unwittingly conceal his prey.

Mick Hervey had refused to admit that he was, in truth, Alistair Dennison to 'the bitter end', and a subsequent search of his premises had failed to reveal any evidence that the Australian was the scientist under which Albert had formerly served. He had not expected it to be that easy -- after all, the assassin had been tracking the biologist for years, travelling from one prairie town to another on the long route Alistair had followed in his effort to put his tracker 'off the scent.'

Indeed, he had almost succeeded, for the trail had grown cold when the vehicle Dennison had utilized for his cross-country travels was found abandoned, with no sign of its driver, nor cavy cargo. Alistair had continued on horseback, and 'a man on a horse' was not exactly a description that tended to yield specific information from potential witnesses.

It would be a landowner, a farmer who would submit a detailed explanation regarding the hows, whys and wherefores of his declaration that the only people who passed through his property were headed to Suffield, over one hundred kilometres away. Further, the last time he had witnessed a man on a horse do such was years earlier, notable for the fact that it was only the second occurrence in over forty years.

Albert was not that excited at first; there was nothing obvious about the vague recollection, and it appeared the farmer was merely lonely, and looking for some desperately needed social interaction. Nevertheless, the rarity of the described incident gnawed at the back of Johnson's critical mind for months, finally forcing him to conclude that, since Alistair was most likely to do the least likely thing, the man on the horse had probably been his target, after all.

Obviously, he was delighted to find Alistair in Suffield.

Conversely, Dennison's ensuing demise was not so fortunate. The eventualities of the guinea pig were certain to be known only to him, and until that information presented itself to Albert, he had needed the scientist alive.

Much to his dismay, circumstances did not obey the assassin's wishes. It would rob him of his opportunity, and leave Albert bereft of any hope that his mission would conclude easily, and he would finally be free of the noose that hung heavily about his neck.

The Smiths were not happy -- an understatement.

Every day that passed was one closer to the dire occasion upon which Dennison's fetid guinea pig would finally rear its long-snouted head, and the 'miracle' that was intestinal biochemical conversion would be trumpeted from the rooftops, sending the price of oil plunging to mere pennies -- the Smiths' financial ruin.

In consequence, they began to deduct from Albert's fee, daily. When this amount became negative, they would then begin to contribute to a new fund, one designed to pay a second assassin to lay the first to rest, once the requisite fee was reached.

This was not a far-off event -- although, even were he to escape this particular threat, another loomed not far into the future, not an 'if', but a 'when'.

You might excuse Albert then for his apparent mishandling of the Dennison affair, for he had a great deal on his mind.

"That Adelaide," Missus Auburn droned on, "she brought her animal to school again today. I don't know why the vice-principal chooses to look the other way; after all, pets on school property are illegal, you know --"

Absent-mindedly, Albert interjected. "Rumsfeld is a nice dog, though."

"Oh, of course he is," replied Missus Auburn, delighted to finally receive external feedback to her musings. "But I'm not talking about Rumsfeld."

She had Albert's full attention.

"What are you talking about, then?" he inquired, with some eagerness, anticipating the woman's response. After all, the Pemberton's had taken over the Feed and Supply after Dennison died; this was not overlooked. However, he could not risk exposure, and direct investigation of the Pemberton household was not prudent without further implication.

As well, Rumsfeld would have strenuously objected -- or Peter, and either one or the other was always on guard there.

In any event, despite his annoyance that he had failed to deduce Adelaide's possession of the guinea pig through passive observation, he was still jubilant when Sarah Auburn gifted him the following, precious snippet of information.

"I'm talking about that rodent she carries around in her jacket. I think it's called a -- a whinny pig?"

"Guinea pig." Albert was not visibly excited, of course.

"Yes, that's it. A guinea pig. Filthy creatures. I'm told they eat their own faeces."

Albert grinned. "Yes. Yes, they do."

"Oh, so you're an expert on the subject?"

"I have a passing acquaintance with those animals, yes. They're not that bad."

"Yes, well, you're new here," discounting him. "Anyway, pets are not permitted on school property. What if someone decided that they could bring their pet snake? That would be a real problem."

Albert sighed. "I don't think anyone in Suffield has a pet snake. At least, no one still alive, or wishing to remain that way."

Sarah Auburn was starting to think somewhat less favourably of Mister Johnson's contributions. "Make fun if you must, but rules are rules, Albert. Where would we be in life if we had no rules?"

"Happier," he mumbled, under his breath.

"That explains it. You sound just like her."

"Who?"

"Adelaide Pemberton. You're all going to contribute to the fall of civilization; do you know that? Your flippant disregard for the rule of order will be the end of us all."

The warning bell rang, signalling the imminent resumption of school activities, and Albert was not given the chance to respond; however, had he been given the ability, he might have said, "From where I'm sitting, the 'rule of order' seems to be doing that quite productively on its own."

Of course, he would have been right.

Regardless, the issue was then one of apprehending Adelaide Pemberton, taking control of the guinea pig, and delivering it to the Smiths after ascertaining whether or not the girl knew anything regarding the creature's odd capabilities. This would need to be handled delicately; any sort of rash action on Albert's part might lead to his own detention, and the flight of his prey -- this would not be a desirable development.

As Missus Auburn had pointed out, the vice-principal was not interested in relieving Adelaide of her pet -- so an exercise of authority was bound to fail. No, he would need to gain the girl's confidence, and then use it against her, quietly slipping away at the

conclusion of his operation to live what remained of his life in peace and comfort, somewhere much warmer.

This plan would be found to fail, for during Physical Education that day, he would come to realize that Adelaide and Tanya both abhorred him, and it became obvious that they were at least in some small way aware of his true nature.

In the favour of his enterprise, he did, however, come to the inspired conclusion that there was no guinea pig in Adelaide Pemberton's gym shorts. He sent his class for a jogging excursion, while he thoroughly searched the change rooms.

The guinea pig was not there.

Albert's primary virtue was that he never neglected the iron grip he held upon his patience. An assassin could not afford the steep price one tended to pay for losing one's temper, and acting with haste. Such irrational responses only sponsored doom in the affairs of such people; his prudence argued this quite doggedly whilst the grown man partook in an infant's tantrum, disrupting the contents of the changing rooms most effectively.

Jeremy Henderson was a known associate of Adelaide Pemberton, but harassing the son of the local police constable was an indiscreet manoeuvre. He might have the creature in his school bag -- Jeremy was presently in mathematics class with Sarah Auburn, and Albert would pay the class a visit only to conclude that the animal was not there, after observing the boy's rough treatment of his satchel.

The guinea pig must be at the Pemberton residence.

That period of Physical Education was the concluding class of the day, and this left Albert with a serious problem. Adelaide was certain to depart home directly, out of concern for her pet. This would not permit Albert the time he needed to proceed to her home himself, and capture the wayward subject without intervention.

Peter was absent; this he knew for certain -- the Feed and Supply was taking stock under the proprietor's supervision. He need only confine Adelaide while retaining his own freedom.

"Adelaide," he announced at the conclusion of his class, "Missus Auburn told me to remind you that you have detention this afternoon."

"What? I do not." Adelaide was unimpressed.

"That's what she said."

"I don't care what she said, I didn't do anything."

Albert grinned. "Tell it to the judge. Class dismissed."

Tanya and Adelaide whispered to each other quietly, alarming Johnson's keen sense of suspicion.

"Let me escort you to the detention hall, shall I?" he insisted, herding the young women from the gym, and down the corridor.

"But, I don't have detention," Tanya protested.

Johnson laughed. "You do now."

"What?"

They moved in silence, marching as slowly as possible down the hallway. Then, the Vice-Principal came along.

"Mister Marcette," called Tanya, interrupting the man's stride and gaining his attention, "I need to talk to you."

The procession stopped.

"Why, Tanya? What's the problem?"

"I'm pregnant," Tanya said, without ceremony but with surety.

Adelaide gasped, holding her hands over her mouth.

"Oh dear," the Vice-Principal responded.

"There's more."

Albert had the unsettling feeling this was not going to go well for him.

"Yes, Tanya?" asked Mister Marcette, his voice betraying his own foreboding.

"The baby is Albert's."

"Do you mean Mister Johnson?"

“One and the same.”

The eyebrows on the administrator then raised father than one might have thought physically possible. “All right. Tanya and Mister Johnson will now go to my office.”

“Adelaide Pemberton has detention,” Albert insisted. “She must be accompanied there.”

“Then I will take her, and meet you momentarily.” The Vice-Principal signalled the conclusion of their current discussion, and led Adelaide down the hall.

The less-than-friendly Missus Mortimer, French instructor, was in charge of the detention hall, and never abandoned her post for any reason. This provided Albert Johnson with some measure of assurance, for all he need do was settle the matter of Tanya’s fictitious accusation and he could then depart, running to the Pemberton residence and taking his prize.

“First, the school nurse will administer a pregnancy test,” began Mister Marcette, once he, Tanya and Albert had been sequestered within the Vice-Principal’s office. He called for the medical practitioner to enter, and escort the girl in question to the toilet.

While they were so otherwise engaged, the remaining pair would have a brief conversation.

“This is not good,” said Marcette, shaking his head incessantly. “Not good.”

“I did not have sexual relations with that woman,” Albert reiterated repeatedly, hoping to convince his superior of his innocence. It was not at all successful.

“This is not good.”

“Look, she’s putting you on.”

Marcette looked at Johnson inquisitively. “And why would she want to do that?”

Albert cleared his throat nervously. “I don’t know.”

One might think he was losing his touch, and one would be right. If you had a brain tumour, and had only been recently

advised of such as in his case, you would likely be equally flustered, would you not?

The women returned.

“Well,” said the nurse, declaring a verdict, “she’s pregnant.”

The Vice-Principal then contacted the Principal, who insisted that they all wait for his arrival, in approximately one-quarter of one hour.

This was coming dangerously close to the time of Adelaide Pemberton’s release.

He pleaded; he argued. Tanya was quite concise as to the details of her teacher’s inappropriate actions -- she named dates and locations, for all of which Johnson had no alibi. This drew his deep concern. The only way that Tanya would have been capable of constructing such a fraud would be if she had been monitoring his movements for quite some time.

This was not a fortunate revelation. She might know a great deal more than he could permit. That she was pregnant, although not with his child, made the issue even more unpalatable.

Time carried on.

The Principal arrived, three minutes before Adelaide was due to depart. Tanya would make her statement, and two minutes would remain. Mister Johnson would refute her allegations, and one minute would remain. The Principal would suspend Albert from teaching pending further criminal investigation -- Johnson would readily agree, and flee the office of the Vice-Principal mere seconds after Adelaide had regained her liberty.

He ran down the corridor, and launched himself through the doors into the chill air outside, where he came into abrupt contact with Jeremy Henderson’s fist, breaking his nose once again. He fell to the ground.

“Would you stop doing that?” he shouted nasally, holding his nostrils closed in an effort to stop his blood from flowing freely down his face.

“Get up, so I can hit you again, you person of low moral virtue,” Jeremy did not precisely growl.

Albert rolled his eyes, and then noticed Adelaide Pemberton boarding the rear of a motorcycle.

“Hey,” he yelled, clambering to his feet, “wait!”

Jeremy did as he had previously threatened, and assaulted Johnson again, while Adelaide rode off into the distance on the mechanical steed of the one most likely to have sired Tanya's unborn child.

Albert swore.

“I couldn't have put it better myself,” Jeremy grinned.

“I'm going to make you regret this,” vowed Johnson, looking up at the young man from the ground below.

“What are you going to do, exactly, call the cops?”

He was correct; at that moment there was nothing to be done, and by the time Jeremy released Albert from his custody, Adelaide Pemberton was gone from Suffield, as was one unique guinea pig.

Outsmarted by three adolescent children, Albert was finding his patience to be growing rather thin.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:

STAR BRIGHT.

THIS WAS NOT WHAT ADELAIDE PEMBERTON HAD IN MIND.

It was cold. Extremely so, the way it tended to be on the Canadian prairies during dark November nights. Although she was quite literally wearing ‘three of everything’, the biting chill still penetrated her textile armour -- she was certainly not comfortable.

Wrapped in two layers of woollen socks, Gig was nestled close to Adelaide’s chest while Rumsfeld, in an effort to stave off hypothermia, ran about the horse, Elmore, that his charges presently rode.

The sky was clear, devoid of clouds. Although this encouraged the temperature to fall lower, it also had the distinct benefit of permitting Adelaide to navigate by the stars, in the fashion that Jeremy had taught her only just recently, travelling across hill and dale in an effort to avoid pursuit by the reprehensible Albert Johnson.

He had made his nefarious intentions quite obvious during the fiasco that had taken place earlier that day. Only through the brave efforts of Jeremy and Tanya had Adelaide and her exceptional cavy been given the indulgence of escape.

She worried for them.

Tanya’s ‘social acquaintance’, the motorcycling mechanic, had graciously offered to provide Adelaide with much-needed transportation. They had departed promptly from the school, and made haste to the Pemberton home, where Gig was collected, along with a carry bag of necessities, pre-assembled with foresight, earlier.

Then, he took her to Elmore, and she began her journey.

Adelaide’s destination was a small farm near Crabhole Creek, an almost insignificant settlement thirty kilometres to the southeast of Suffield. Unable to stress Elmore in the bitter cold, it

would take three hours at a trot, assuming that the wind did not rise against them.

An hour into the excursion, Rumsfeld made his appearance; at first concerned that the approaching figure might be a wild dog, wolf or coyote, Adelaide became quite frightened, but when her faithful companion was recognized, she felt great relief.

With the assistance of the tiny lights far above, they would reach Crabhole Creek, and the safety it would provide through the generosity of Jeremy's uncle, Angus.

"Was worried you weren't going to make it," the portly, elderly man said, opening the gate and allowing the troupe's admission. "It's really cold out here."

Adelaide merely nodded, not wishing to engage in a pointless conversation comprised of obvious notions regarding the ambient temperature. She wanted warmth, and would soon have it, inside the small house that was Angus's home.

"Here, have some coffee while I fix you a nice big steak."

Rumsfeld was quite enthused by that statement; the poor canine was famished. Adelaide, however, was not so eager to partake in the giant cross-section of undercooked bovine flesh that was subsequently presented to her.

For his part, the dog was well satisfied.

Gig, still nestled in his socks, was fed what little vegetables that were provided with the mammoth piece of meat -- uncertain as to Angus's potential reaction to that which most saw as a 'rodent', Gig's presence remained secret, and Adelaide stayed fully clothed.

"When Jeremy contacted me by radio, I was pretty surprised," mused Angus, washing up while Adelaide ate her supper. "I figured it must be urgent though."

Less likely to be monitored by those loyal to the Smiths, Jeremy's choice of refuge had been well thought out.

"Whatever you're running from, you're well protected here," he continued, nodding towards the assortment of rifles mounted upon the kitchen wall.

"Yea-huh," mumbled Adelaide autonomically over a mouth full of steak.

"So, what is it then? Your boyfriend; your father?" He didn't give her a chance to speak. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. Jeremy's a good boy; if he says you deserve my help, than that's just how it is."

Adelaide, uncertain as to how she might contribute to Angus's ramblings, nodded slowly, cautiously, not wishing to offend.

"How is Jeremy, anyway? We don't talk much anymore. I guess that's normal for teenagers. They have better things to do."

"He's good," Adelaide said, passing Rumsfeld a piece of fat under the table.

Chores completed, Angus sat down at the table, mug of coffee in hand. "I heard he's really good at sports."

"Yeah, he's on the hockey team and stuff. I'm pretty proud of him."

"Whoa," grinned Angus, feigning surprise. "That's high praise from a teenage girl. I think someone's a little sweet on old Jeremy, there." He laughed loudly, then, the way that farmers tend to do, and Adelaide's face turned a lovely shade of rose.

She moved to retort, and inform the man that she was in no way romantically interested in her childhood friend, but stopped, for that was a lie.

Instead, she said nothing.

"Oh, that's okay," Angus smiled. "He's a great guy, that Jeremy. We used to go hunting every so often, when he was younger. He's a great shot; he can take a deer down from a quarter mile away." The farmer sipped his coffee while he slipped into contemplation.

"I shot a deer," said the twelve year-old Jeremy proudly to his next-door neighbour, Adelaide.

"Gross," replied the girl, flatly.

"Oh, come on," protested Jeremy. "You eat meat, don't you?"

"Only because it's 'dietarily necessary'"

"I don't think 'dietarily' is a word."

"It is too," Adelaide argued. "I just said it, so it's a word."

Jeremy shook his head. "What will I ever do with you, Adelaide Pemberton?"

"Buy me a milkshake?"

Angus spoke once again, returning from his reflection. "He saved my life once." There was a long pause, with no clarification given of such a dramatic declaration. "He's quite a guy."

Adelaide could only agree.

"These meatballs taste weird," said young Adelaide of her supper, an Italian noodle-based dish known as 'spaghetti'.

Peter chuckled. "That's because they're made from deer."

"Deer? Not Jeremy's deer."

"The same. They didn't have enough room in their freezer for all of the meat, so they gave some to us."

Visions of Jeremy's murderous conquest over the poor, defenceless animal paraded themselves within Adelaide's vibrant imagination -- his face painted with the creature's still-warm blood, he danced like a savage, shouting his dominance toward the Gods.

She lost her appetite. "I don't want it."

"Oh, for crying out loud, Adelaide; it's just meat."

"It tastes funny." She pushed her plate away.

"Picky. There are many children in this world who would give anything for a meal like that."

"They can have it. I'll mail it to them."

We float on the sea, sky above and ocean below; unable to see in the murky waters under us, we can only strive to be like those

we view in the sunshine visible overhead, unable to spy those less fortunate in the depths beneath.

This went double for Adelaide Pemberton.

Peter shook his head in disbelief at his daughter's arrogant insolence. "Maybe I should mail you to them."

She gasped. "Are they cannibals?"

"Do you even know what that means?"

Adelaide paused. "Not exactly."

"Anyhow," said Angus, "I guess I'll show you to your room. Your dog can stay out on the back porch, with our collie, Ruthie." His brow furrowed. "He has been fixed, hasn't he?" he inquired, in reference to Rumsfeld's fertility.

"Yes, he has." Rumsfeld's tail wagged.

"Well, all right then." Adelaide followed Angus down the corridor, to a small room perched off the end of the house, a crooked addition obviously constructed by those having ingested too much alcohol in the process.

"There's a heater in here; you should probably just leave it on. Don't want you to freeze to death. My wife Martha's made muffins; they're in the kitchen if you get hungry. Anything else I can do for you?"

"Actually, there is." Adelaide explained her need for another waypoint, one that Jeremy would not know, should he be questioned.

Angus scratched his head. "You'd be going by horse?"

She nodded.

"In what direction?"

"North."

"Well, it's a hundred kilometres away, so it'll take you all day tomorrow, but I can arrange something with my old friend Bill. I guess I'll try to reach him on the radio, so we can keep things discreet."

"Thanks, Angus."

"Don't mention it. Must be some trouble you're in."

She sighed. "Probably better you don't know."

"Probably right. G'night."

"Good night, Angus." He exited the room, and Adelaide was given some privacy, to reconcile the day's events within the turmoil that resided inside her mind.

"Taking Gig to school probably isn't a good thing to do," Jeremy had advised, "at least for a while."

It was hard to disagree; given Gig's newfound ability, circumstances had certainly changed. Ajax was likely to soon identify Adelaide as the protector of what he sought -- when that happened, Gig must not be readily available to his clutches.

He would be kept in the basement, hidden behind the furnace; it was not ideal, Adelaide knew, but necessary. This precaution was not longstanding in any event, for it was less than a week before Johnson made his deduction, and the chase had begun.

With no jail cells of its own, Suffield could not restrain Ajax for long. 'Sexual relations with a minor' was not a heinous enough crime to hold the man in custody, and once released, his pursuit of Gig was guaranteed.

The hair on his belly had fallen out, apparently a side effect of his variation on 'straw into gold'. A message was found, written there, tattooed upon his stomach, a series of letters followed by two numbers. Subsequently assumed to have been composed of base-26 code, Adelaide had utilized her computer to determine that the characters were co-ordinates for a location, deep within the Rocky Mountains.

For whatever reason, Mick Hervey wished for her to travel there -- perhaps there would be assistance, aid to fend off Albert Johnson. Regardless, there was little else Adelaide could do. Joe had thought the entire affair to be ridiculous, and would do nothing.

Peter was not likely to be any better.

She was on her own, on a quest to discover the truth, and protect her precious charge at any cost from the evil that ruled the world.

“Oh God,” she whispered to herself. “I’m Frodo.”

It was a sleepless night, there, in the crooked room, kept barely tolerable by the electric heater Adelaide and Gig huddled closely to, beneath several layers of woollen blankets. Tomorrow held another journey, to a further waypoint -- Jeremy’s plan was for her to travel both away and toward her destination, so that Albert might become confused regarding her true intentions, and embark upon a fruitless search in the wrong direction.

Meanwhile, Tanya and Jeremy were bound and gagged, in Albert Johnson’s Suffield residence.

“Mornin’” greeted Angus, mug of coffee in his hands. He offered the brew to the sleepy Adelaide, who accepted gratefully.

“I talked to Bill,” he said, while turning to attend pork and potato, frying on his stove. “He says you’re welcome to spend the night there, but it’s forecast to be stormy. Might not be the best travelling weather.”

Adelaide wrinkled her nose. “I have to keep moving.”

“Should I be worried?”

“If some black guy shows up, you don’t know anything. Better yet, shoot him.”

Angus recoiled. “Not an ex-boyfriend?”

“No.”

The nervous farmer toyed with the contents of his skillet, not wishing to betray his unease. “Don’t you worry there, Sunshine. I’ll keep him off your scent.”

After breakfast, Adelaide, Gig, Rumsfeld and Elmore would depart, along with a healthy supply of Martha’s muffins, towards the grim clouds that hung over the horizon. Sincere prayers were made that the impending storm would stay its hand long enough for the group to achieve their goal, that of Bill’s cabin, near Taylor Lake, Saskatchewan.

It was not any warmer than the day previous, but not colder, either -- that small mercy was welcomed by the band, slowly plodding across the snow-covered landscape.

Angus had provided a series of headings and landmarks, but had warned that these might be inaccurate, since he had not been that way in quite some time. The first few legs of the journey were uneventful; little had changed, and the farmer's recollection had proven generally accurate. However, two or three hours into their excursion, they encountered a serious obstruction.

A fence was there. Not of the typical trio of barbed wire, this was a chain-link barrier crowned with the aforementioned dissuasion. Obviously, Elmore could not traverse this obstacle -- they must go around.

It was a very, very long fence.

Running east to west, this impediment could only increase the time required to reach their next destination. As the minutes ticked away into hours, Adelaide's anxiety grew exponentially, to the point of panic. The thought of withdrawing back to Angus's farm was constantly on her mind, but the risk Ajax would discover her there tempered the desire to retreat, and drove her onwards.

They would find the edge of the fence; two hours and twenty kilometres diverted, it became a race against time to evade the wrath of the storm certain to soon cast its anger upon the surface -- and those who inhabited it.

Elmore was strongly encouraged to gallop, his strength kept up with Martha's muffins.

Across the vast, empty fields of white they hurried, while the sky grew dark, and snowflakes began to sparsely descend, gradually increasing in intensity. Kilometre after kilometre was measured and tallied; the landmarks were easily found, but the delay caused by the fence placed immense pressure upon their itinerary.

Unfortunately, the wind began to rise.

The hair that emerged from Adelaide's 'touque', essentially a sock for the head, flailed wildly while her face was buffeted by crystals made of ice, thrust by the wind, freezing her exposed skin.

They were still twenty kilometres away. Adelaide's tender tailbone was very vocal regarding its unhappiness.

Rumsfeld vanished; his presence was known only by his occasional barking. Visibility was all of a few metres in any given direction.

It seemed hopeless. The troupe would have to rely on Elmore's inherent sense of direction, which was indeed quite strong, having been genetically engineered by Alistair Dennison. In consequence, they would make Taylor Lake, and Bill's cabin, in complete whiteout conditions -- Adelaide was amazed at her horse's good fortune, but, his history unknown to her, she only attributed his feat to luck.

"That's some horse," marvelled Bill, astonished by his guests' unlikely late arrival.

"Coffee," pleaded the half-frozen Adelaide, desperately. Bill obliged.

"Didn't know if you were going to make it. Glad you did." Bill was clad in wading boots and suspenders -- he could be described as the composite white Canadian fresh-water fisherman, were it not that he was indigenous.

He situated Adelaide in front of his stone hearth, while he prepared what smelled like chicken soup. Bill poured a bowl full, and offered it to Adelaide, who ate eagerly. Rumsfeld was furnished with the remains of the bird, and he took to its bones hungrily, crushing them between his muscular jaws.

"This chicken soup tastes a bit funny," she said.

"That's because it's duck."

Adelaide opted to place her reservations regarding wild game aside, in favour of satiating her ravenous hunger.

Famished and ignored, Gig wheeked.

"What on earth is that?"

Adelaide was unable to muster the energy required with which to manufacture another, even remotely plausible explanation. "It's my guinea pig."

"You travelled cross-country, in a blizzard, with a guinea pig?"

She sighed. "No, I travelled cross-country, in a blizzard, because," she emphasized, "of a guinea pig."

He looked understandably confused.

Adelaide revealed Gig, swaddled in his pair of woollen socks, and inquired as to if their host might have a raw carrot, or some straw. He had both, and Gig was happy once again.

Bill was mystified. "This is all about a guinea pig? I trust Angus like a brother, but I find it hard to believe--"

"This?" Adelaide interrupted, concern mounting in her heart. "What do you mean, 'this'?"

A grave expression grew on his face. "Earlier this afternoon, Angus told me that an unwelcome guest had arrived, the one responsible for your travels." He scowled.

"He said he didn't like the looks of him, and he was getting his gun. I haven't been able to raise him since."

Adelaide went white at all that implied, and held Gig close to her chest.

"That's not reassuring," said Bill.

The forest was ablaze once again. They all ran; Bear, Eagle, Cougar and every other woodland creature was forced to flee for their lives from the smoke and flames in what was becoming a far too regular occurrence.

Apparently, the humans' previous despicable endeavour had proved so successful that they had conspired to engage in such terrible behaviour for a second time.

Obviously, the truce Eagle had brokered with Cougar was broken.

Any hope of further diplomacy was forever lost.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:

LOOSE ENDS.

THIS WAS NOT WHAT ALBERT JOHNSON HAD IN MIND.

He was in pain. Not only had Jeremy broken his nose once again, he had also fallen upon his backside, and bruised his tender, injured posterior, causing all manner of havoc within his digestive tract.

This had, in turn, inflamed his hands and feet, making him feel as if he were crucified. Perhaps, he ought to have been, given the particulars of the present situation.

The ghosts of the damned howled this very want at Albert from outside the tiny farmhouse, previously inhabited by two souls named Angus and Martha Henderson. That is, although they still remained there, physically, they did not spiritually, for Ajax had been quite proficient in his prior dispatch of them to the world beyond.

That had been unfortunate, for it was his hope to have at least one still-living person to interrogate -- regrettably, Martha had started to dial the constabulary on her telephone, and Albert was forced to shoot her, from the doorway, across the room.

He was not known for making disabling shots.

This was a shame; without testimony, the trail was, for the moment, cold. It would take a great deal of effort to sift through the contents of the cluttered farmhouse, and work to deduce the possible destinations of his quarry -- this would take time he could not afford.

Thankfully, Jeremy had not been long in capitulating to Ajax's demands for accurate information. The boy having made his strength of will soon apparent, his inquisitor had turned his methods upon Tanya, the details of which are best left unwritten.

Let us simply state that the American army had trained their former soldier quite well.

He had then left Suffield, and his two captives, navigating the roundabout route by road to Crabhole Creek in his inefficient, but robust American-made motorcar.

Angus had made the mistake of greeting Albert with a rifle at close range. Having a kind heart, the farmer was not given to quickly resolve to shoot at another man with such frail conviction -- this provided Johnson with the opportunity to seize the firearm, and reverse its aim onto its owner.

Ajax had no such crisis of scruples, for those he did have were few -- but he did have them.

For example, he did not kill Tanya, nor Jeremy -- neither did he drown those children, like kittens in sacks. In his mind, this separated him from the true monsters. Others would certainly disagree with him, but this notion kept him sane, that this bare shred of morality meant he was still human.

Tanya, however, no longer saw him as such, nor would she again.

Martha had committed the fatal error of attending to the scene of her husband's demise directly and unthinkingly -- a clichéd act, and one rewarded with a similarly typical response on the part of the intruder, killing her before she could successfully alert the authorities when she had been provided ample opportunity with which to do so.

Albert would search, then, with some urgency whilst Tanya and Jeremy contemplated ways of escaping their own predicament, bound and gagged in the darkened cellar of Johnson's abandoned Suffield home. Unable to see, unable to speak, they could but only whimper when Constable Henderson made his entrance into the ground floor, and surveyed it to discover nothing of note, since the cavern underneath was concealed by carpeting and furniture.

Joe was gravely concerned, for by morning he had realized that his son had been absent for quite some time, the snow having collected within his bedroom due to an open window, and indicating a long absence. Rousing a drunken Peter, his neighbour, he had found the man completely useless, a woeful example of a father who had succumbed to his own selfish urges, and did not care that his child was unaccounted for.

Disgusted, the constable slapped him.

“You don’t know anything!” he shouted, his speech slurred by the alcohol that remained in his blood. “It was that Mick Hervey,” he snarled, grimacing grotesquely. “If he had left well enough alone,” he trailed off, to a whisper.

Joe frowned at Peter with disdain. “Adelaide’s your daughter. You need to help me find her.”

“No,” Peter clarified, staggering, “I don’t. I don’t care. Don’t you understand?”

Constable Henderson shook his head, signifying that he, indeed, did not.

“Mick Hervey is -- was -- a clever man. Whatever he’s done, there’s nothing we can do except wait for it to be over. So, why don’t you just sit down with me, and have a drink?”

Peter Pemberton’s appalling offer was ungraciously rejected, and the policeman subsequently departed, on his own, to find their children.

Tanya was missing, too; not surprisingly, her mother was in no better shape than Peter, and had even less concern.

Joe was not at all impressed with the quality of parentage in his small town.

In Constable Henderson’s mind, the likelihood that Jeremy’s outlandish tale regarding Adelaide Pemberton’s guinea pig, and the suspected true nature of Albert Johnson, might have some accuracy began to increase, if only a small amount.

With no other avenues to pursue, he went to call upon the Physical Education instructor.

Meanwhile, that very gentleman was tearing a small farmhouse, near Crabhole Creek, apart. Anything could be a clue; he mentally inventoried and catalogued every item meticulously, or as thoroughly as his tumour infested cranium was capable, ruminating over their relevance and working to extract any secrets they might hold.

He found a freshwater fishing rod, in one closet, and some hip waders, in another. The boots had a tag inside, with the name

'Bill' scrawled upon it. 'Bill' was also scribbled on a receipt for some food, purchased at a restaurant at a highway junction some fifty kilometres to the north -- two meals, which were paid in full, with one credit card.

It seemed that Angus and Bill were close enough that the former would provide supper for the latter, but perhaps, reciprocation was expected.

This was an important revelation, with a vital distinction.

Constable Henderson was engaged in an investigation of his own. Albert Johnson's vehicle was missing -- this was the first time the policeman had observed its use since Johnson's arrival in Suffield, and did not bode well. Tossing aside the standard decorum of Royal Canadian Mounted Police regulations, his instinct as a parent took hold, and he broke down Albert's door.

The house was sparsely furnished, clean and organized. It was cold inside; the heating was switched off. There would be few details to analyse; it seemed that either Johnson was obsessively tidy, or did not wish his domicile to inconveniently yield any pertinent facts while under scrutiny.

This, of course, only exacerbated Joe's growing doubt regarding the man's innocence.

He could not hear his son, hidden away below, although Jeremy understood that his father was mere metres away, and this realization was driving him mad.

At two o'clock that morning, the junior hockey player had finally nodded off whilst viewing commercial advertising displayed upon his television screen, and awoken some time later to find himself no longer in his bedroom, but instead in the cellar, at some location unknown to him.

He was both bewildered, and impressed. How Albert Johnson had managed to sedate the strapping young man, extract him from his room, under the nose of his father, and subsequently transport him to his present location was an unfathomable mystery whose explanation was liable to rival the greatest capers of all time.

Unfortunately, we can only guess how it might have been done. Some have suggested that Johnson employed a third party, a person who has, to this day, remained unnamed. However, it would

be highly irregular for one as highly skilled as Mister Ajax to leave such a loose end untied, and none other than those in our cast have been found to be involved in any notable event around this period and in that area -- including untimely demise.

No, he must have achieved this feat alone.

There were no footprints found on the front, or rear steps of the Henderson home that did not match Joe or Jeremy; only the young man's window, habitually left unsecured so that Adelaide might visit, remained as both a point of entry and exit. The very idea that Albert could negotiate the comatose Jeremy through the window, and then out to the street, into a vehicle and then from it, into the cellar is difficult to believe.

This is especially so when faced with the testimony of Constable Henderson, who states in his investigative writings that he found no indication of a body being pushed, pulled or dragged in any fashion along the ground from Jeremy's window to the street.

Rivalling Houdini, a contemporary master of escape and illusion, Albert had seemingly performed the impossible, and to this day there has been no plausible explanation put forth -- there is a large movement that believes Jeremy was enchanted with a mind controlling medicine, and that Johnson merely directed his hypnotized victim to follow, but no proof has even been provided that such a potion has ever existed. For the purposes of science, this theory cannot be advanced as truth.

In any event, Jeremy was in the cellar, and Albert Johnson was there too.

"Where's Adelaide?" asked the Physical Education instructor, politely.

Jeremy retorted a far less civilized response.

Albert grinned. "Come, now, Jeremy. If you haven't realized already, you're not in the best shape. You owe me two broken noses."

The young man flinched, anticipating that Johnson was to collect, imminently.

"However," Albert continued, opting to avoid violence, at least for that moment, "you can pay me back by telling me where Adelaide is. So, where is she?"

The debt would not be settled in Albert's desired fashion; rather, their books would be balanced in a more savage way.

"I'm afraid that, now that we're square, if you don't tell me what I want to know, you may have to extend me a line of credit."

There were photographs found at the farmhouse, several hundred in fact, and Albert would look at every one, the lives of those he had recently killed portrayed before his eyes in vivid colour, evoking no sympathy nor empathy. He would be as if a guest at the wedding of Angus and Martha; he would witness the birth of their children, and see the happy family grow older.

The farmer's progeny would become adults, and move on; their parents would settle into the 'golden years' of their lives, happy at their accomplishments -- then a nameless intruder would brutally massacre them.

He saw two fishermen.

That is, they were seen in a photograph, one Angus, and the other, an indigenous gentleman presumed to be Bill, in front of a lake. Then, there was another picture, of Angus in front of a cabin. There were radio antennae visible in both images; in the first, a large transmission tower stood on the opposite shore, and the second, a small short-range mast was mounted on the roof.

Frantic, the inspired Mister Ajax hunted for, and quickly found, a map of key broadcast locations beside Angus's radio. Someone was calling for the farmer, occasionally, likely Bill, but Albert could not betray his interest by inquiring, hoping the man might betray his location -- he did not, but it would not matter, for Johnson would soon surmise that to be Taylor Lake, one hundred kilometres to the north.

It made sense; the men would converse through the radio, and meet halfway occasionally for a meal. Sometimes, Angus would stay at the cabin, and the friends would go fishing. Based on observation, this was Angus's closest relationship beyond his wife, and the most likely place he would send Adelaide Pemberton.

The case was closed. Setting the farmhouse afire, Albert departed.

Constable Henderson was not sharing in such generous deductive fortunes. Sadly, he was instead incapable of finding anything that might tell him the whereabouts of Jeremy, Tanya, Adelaide or Albert Johnson. Fear, that his child might be forever lost, bloomed inside his heart, and he began to weep.

Warmth, spilling from a vent in the wall beside him, dried his tears.

Joe's reasoning splashed him with cold water, and he dashed to the thermostat, where it was found to still be switched off. Firstly, he wished to know why the heating had so suddenly become functional, and secondly, where the furnace was, for this purportedly single-level home did not appear to have such an appliance on its only floor.

The answers were simple; there must be a basement, and someone had manually fired the furnace.

He called out, shouting to whoever may be there to respond, but there was no reply to his appeals. It may be, he thought, that whoever they were, they might not be capable of answering him. He would need to find access to the cavern assumed to be below, and quickly, for they may be injured.

Given that possibility, and the chance that his son might be trapped there, he would pay no regard to Albert Johnson's personal property, and use all means at his disposal to encourage the floor to reveal its secret.

Shortly, he uncovered a trapdoor, and was consequently untying his battered son, relieved.

"Dad," Jeremy said, after his gag was removed, "Johnson's gone after Adelaide."

Joe examined his son's face, bruised and bloody. "Tanya's over there," Jeremy indicated, and the constable went to attend her.

Lying beneath a blanket, the sum total of Mister Ajax's charity, she was in terrible condition, and required medical aid. Constable Henderson reassured his son that his absence would be

temporary, and returned above to his vehicle, to summon assistance.

The ambulance arrived soon after, and Tanya was taken away, to be treated in hospital at a larger neighbouring town. Prayers were said that she would recover, and swiftly.

Jeremy was angry, and so was Joe. However, only one person remained that might have any answers, and that man was hopelessly inebriated.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Peter insisted, noticeably apprehensive. "Gig is just a guinea pig."

"He is not 'just a guinea pig'," Jeremy shouted at the drunken Pemberton. "You know more than that; I know you do."

"Constable," Peter demanded, "please control your son."

Joe slapped Peter again.

"Some help you are," he slurred, offended. "I'm telling you, I don't know anything. Go away, and leave me alone."

"Adelaide's in trouble; aren't you going to do anything?"

"In trouble from what?" Peter laughed. "A guinea pig?"

"No, Albert Johnson."

"What?" Peter shook his head. "No, he's just the Physical Education teacher."

"He's a killer!"

"Oh," Peter smirked, dismissing Jeremy, "you're just racist." Jeremy moved to slap him.

"This is a waste of time," said Joe, holding his son's arm. "We need to head to your uncle Angus's, and see if he's all right."

"Fine. You're pathetic," spat Jeremy at Peter, pushing him backward, the drunken man falling to the floor. "And to think I used to respect you."

They left Peter Pemberton to his alcohol, and his demons.

He lay there, on the polished floorboards of his entry hall, and stared up at the light globe that hung from the ceiling above, watching it as it gently swayed back and forth, the momentum provided by Jeremy's earlier thunderous closure of the front door. The young man was correct; Peter was pathetic, and saw no need to change that assessment. Even if he wanted to, he no longer held the capacity required to do so. He had 'drowned in his drink', and a return to sobriety was a completely unrealistic concept for him; he would never be 'respectable' again.

Peter might as well be dead.

That was a brilliant notion. With the occupants having gone off in search of super-villains and genetically enhanced rodents, he could find a rifle in the Henderson house.

He gracelessly rose to his feet, and stumbled to the front door; however, just as he opened it, the doorbell rang.

Peter spied through the 'fish-eye', a glass ball used to obtain a wide view through a tiny hole in the door, and saw a courier standing there.

"What do you want?" he demanded, through the door.

"I have a letter for Peter Pemberton."

"Who from?"

"It doesn't say." The courier appeared mildly irritated.

"You deliver letters with no return address?"

"We deliver letters for people who give us money." His irritation was no longer mild.

"Fair enough."

A few moments passed. "Are you Peter Pemberton?"

"Who's asking?"

"I am!"

"Oh."

"Look, it's cold out here. If you don't take the letter now, I'll have to drive out here tomorrow, and I don't want to do that." This was quite evident in the tone of the messenger's voice.

"Leave it on the porch," suggested Peter.

"You have to show me identification, and sign for it."

"Do I?"

"Yes. Now, open the door, before I smash all the windows in your car."

Concerned that this was not merely an attempt at dim humour on the courier's part, Peter complied, and their transaction was promptly completed.

The messenger cursed at Peter Pemberton in particularly crude terms, and departed.

Peter paid the epithet no attention, for he had become oddly enamoured by the envelope he consequently held. Something within encouraged him to open it, and not simply burn it as he had previously intended. He did so, to find the following hand-written communication:

"Dear Peter.

"I hope this letter finds you, and well. If you are indeed reading this, then Elmore, my horse, has left the Global Positioning System perimeter that I have configured, and those future events I feared might arise have come to pass.

"Presumably, Adelaide has received my message to her, and she has departed in possession of the guinea pig. That creature is both extraordinary and of the greatest importance to humanity -- Adelaide is doing the world a brave service by delivering him to his destination.

"However, she cannot do it without your help. I know you suspect the true nature of Gig, but do not wish to acknowledge it, for your hatred of me is deep and you want nothing to do with anything I may have hand in. I can only implore you to look beyond your own pain and find it within yourself to aid your daughter, for she is likely presently pursued by those who would see her dead.

“You need to be aware that every member of Julia’s research team, save myself, were killed for that guinea pig. I do not know for certain if Julia is still alive; contacting her is too risky.

“Of course, I must now be dead. You are the only one who can ensure that her legacy lives on to do as it was intended, and save mankind from extinction. If you love her, if you love Adelaide, you will not dally any further, and depart at once.

“Kind regards and humble apologies,

“Alistair Dennison.”

There were a few moments of deliberation, then.

He really did hate Alistair, but this, he realized, did not eclipse his love for Adelaide, or Julia.

“Where on Earth,” Peter asked himself, having made his decision, “does ‘Uncle Angus’ live?”

He went to find out.

CHAPTER NINETEEN:

PIGS IS PIGS.

"AND SO," SHE CONCLUDED, "THAT'S THE STORY SO FAR."

Bill sighed, and shook his head, stifling a laugh. "You white people are crazy."

"Did I forget to mention that Albert Johnson is black?"

"Oh. Well, you're all crazy." His voice was firm on that last point.

"I get that." Adelaide appeared defeated. "So, I take it you don't believe me?"

"It doesn't matter if I believe. You believe, and, more importantly, the guy chasing you believes."

Spirits buoyed, Adelaide's enthusiasm abruptly returned. "So, you'll help me, then?"

"I will. My sister's husband's father's second cousin, three times removed lives some ways off upriver, to the west. If we travel in the river valley, we can avoid detection."

"We?"

"I'm not sitting around here, waiting for some crazy white --

"Black."

"Okay, black guy to come along and shoot me in the back."

"Understandable."

"Anyway, Jimmy can board your horse, and then you can take the bus. It's a pretty remote run; this Albert's not going to stumble upon it accidentally. Besides," he added, only to himself, with a tinge of revenge betrayed in his eye, "once I safely deliver you, I'll be after him."

It was as if, perhaps, she had heard him, anyway. "So, you do believe me."

"Not really. But, Angus died over this baloney, and helping you is obviously not what his murderer wants; so that is what I will do."

The storm raged on for two more days, during which time all Adelaide could do was keep Elmore warm and dry, and Gig fed. Bill, the odd sort of contradiction that he was, kept her entertained with stories of recreational fishing told as if they were Native Canadian epics.

"Living far beneath the lake, below the trout, the walleye and the perch lurks the spirits of those fish, those killed by fishermen who failed to give thanks for their sacrifices. Every so often, an angler makes the mistake of allowing his line to descend a little bit too far, into this land of ghosts, and if they have not given due reverence for their past harvests, the Spirits of the Lake might decide to take notice.

"Sometimes, this can be as simple as merely tugging at the line, teasing a fisherman into battling for hours against a foe he can never catch. Or, maybe the Spirits might yank hard at an unexpected moment, pulling the angler over the side of his boat, and into the water, with nothing more.

"But sometimes, when a fisherman has been particularly disrespectful towards the Spirits, they can drag a man to his death, drowned in the cold waters at the bottom of the lake, to reside there for eternity."

"And you don't believe me?" Adelaide huffed. "Ghosts of fish killing fisherman? Sounds like a bad movie script."

Bill laughed. "It is. At least, I wrote it. Haven't had any offers yet, though."

"Don't hold your breath."

"Hey, it would be cheap to make, and it's not that terrible." Bill grinned. "'The Attack of the Killer Trout.'"

"I hope that's not what you called it."

"Do you have any better ideas?"

Time was spent, then, attempting to construct a better title for Bill's tale of aquatic vengeance, with none found, and Adelaide declared defeat.

"I hope you don't mind me asking," inquired Bill of Adelaide, after some moments had subsequently passed in silence, "where's your Dad in all of of this?"

"He's dead."

"Really? I'm sorry."

"Well," Adelaide grumbled, "he's not actually dead. He's just drinking himself into oblivion." Apparently, Peter's efforts at concealment had not been all that successful, after all.

"Oh. Been there, done that."

"Really? What made you stop?"

Bill's gaze turned contemplative. "I guess I realized that any life is a life worth living."

"I wish my dad would realize that."

"Maybe he will."

The discussion returned, then, to Bill's further thoughts regarding potential motion picture plotlines, until they turned in for the night, hoping that the weather, in the morning, would be suitable for departure.

It was.

Adelaide perched on Elmore, and Bill, like Rumsfeld, on foot, they circled around to the other side of Taylor Lake, and met with the tributary that fed it, the Serpentine River. Despite having done her best to permit her damaged tailbone to heal somewhat over the past two days, it quickly became evident that riding on Elmore's saddle was not going to be tolerable for any length of time.

"We're going to have to move quickly to make Jimmy's place by nightfall," Bill insisted, when Adelaide voiced her desire to walk. "You're just going to have to put up with it."

"It hurts."

"You'd rather freeze to death, or get killed by that Albert guy?"

She frowned. "No."

"Well, then?"

"It hurts," Adelaide reiterated.

A diatribe was launched into then, where Bill detailed the various absurdities that he had encountered concerning the flawed logic so commonly exercised by Caucasian people, such as Adelaide.

"White people are crazy," the young woman concluded for him, restating his earlier assertion pre-emptively.

Bill was aghast. "This is your defence?"

"Why not? Let's call it a disability. Don't we encourage people to be proud of their disabilities these days? I'm proud to be a crazy white woman."

His laughter was boisterous, and very loud.

Adelaide shushed him, harshly. "I thought we were supposed to be keeping things low key?"

They swiftly wound along the river, down inside the narrow valley, carved out of the silt and sand for millennia, with Adelaide intermittently complaining about her tailbone, and Bill threatening to bend her over the horse's back on her stomach, her arms and legs tied together, underneath Elmore, as if she were a prisoner.

She was not given to see him carry through with his proposition, and her protestations became muted. Instead, she began to grow concerned that they were being followed, that Mister Ajax had tracked them, and was presently assessing how best to dispatch them all.

More disturbingly, Rumsfeld had disappeared occasionally, presumably on 'scouting missions', but had not returned from his last foray for over an hour.

Adelaide's paranoia, regarding both issues, started to mount.

"Relax," urged Bill. "Rumsfeld's a wise dog; he can take care of himself. He probably just found something to hunt." She prayed he was right.

"As for your 'Mister Ajax', if he was here, I would know."

Another hour passed in an eerie silence, devoid of all but Elmore's footfalls, echoing across the narrow valley. Rumsfeld did not appear, and Adelaide shouted for him, prompting Bill to threaten to stuff her mouth full of his soiled socks, an idea toward which she was not agreeable.

"I want my dog!"

"Your' dog? Typical."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Whether you think so or not, you can't own another living thing."

"Sure I can. What about Elmore?"

"If he wanted to, he could throw you, and smash your head on the ground."

Adelaide frowned, mentally discarding such a disconcerting concept. "I want my dog!"

The sun's light dimmed, and Bill did not humour the infuriating child with further debate, instead underlining his prior threats in triplicate before hurrying their pace, desperate to reach shelter before the temperature plunged to an intolerable level.

However, by the time that they finally reached Jimmy's tiny hut, and the small stable attached to it, even Bill's hopes for Rumsfeld had faded.

Adelaide was inconsolable, filled with regret and loathing towards all of those who, she conceived, had contributed to her loss. Rumsfeld was the greatest friend she had ever known; it was unthinkable to presume that she could ever be without him.

Sadly, then, she was.

She refused offers of food, and insisted upon sleeping in the stable with Elmore, yet another good friend that she would be

forced to abandon in order to carry on with her mission, one that, she soon started to consider, might be precisely as Bill viewed it -- utter insanity.

Exhausted from the long day's ride, she slept, and meanwhile, Bill and Jimmy searched the night for a dog, one named Rumsfeld that was admired by a young woman, named Adelaide, very much.

The dog would wake her by licking at her face, but made unaware of his absence by the thick veil of her dreams, she would send him away, and return to her land of slumber with indifference. Some time later she would rouse, and, rudely presented with the stark reality of what she had done earlier, rush into Jimmy's hut, desperately hoping to locate her lost friend, and confirm that her experience had not been just fantasy created by an unwillingness to accept the truth.

"Coffee?" offered Jimmy, politely, as his guest burst through the door unannounced.

"Dog?" pleaded Adelaide, her worried features turning to delight once she spied the figure of Rumsfeld, curled up beneath the small, square table at which the two men sat, the creature sleeping.

"He's pretty tired," cautioned Bill, when Adelaide sprang at her furry friend. "You should probably let him rest for a while."

Arresting her urge to mercilessly maul the dog, she instead interrogated the two men regarding the details surrounding his miracle return; however, they would claim only that he arrived on his own, in the early morning, scratching at the door of the hut, barely able to then make it inside, and collapse upon the floor beneath the table.

Adelaide did not believe them, but respected their wishes not to disclose the full extent of their efforts, choosing rather to be quietly thankful for whatever events had led to her reuniting with the beloved dog, Rumsfeld. She placed Gig up against the dog's heaving, sleeping chest, and then made plans for the day ahead.

The bus was scheduled to depart at two that afternoon.

It would travel a very erratic route, heading leisurely west through dozens of small towns, some of which consisted of only a grain elevator and a post office -- or perhaps just one of those.

At two points, she would connect with additional buses, before finally boarding a coach that plied the route between the major Western Canadian cities -- this would do away with any prospect that she could be followed, once and for all.

Bill and Jimmy intended to add a second layer of security, and negate the danger at its source, but they did not discuss their plot with Adelaide, deciding that she would be best kept ignorant of that objective.

The morning progressed, and Adelaide brushed Elmore for one final time, thanking him, as Bill insisted that she must, for his labours; Rumsfeld awoke around midday, rested and reinvigorated, eating all that was placed in front of him.

Jimmy re-supplied Adelaide's dwindling store of provisions, and gave her a pocketknife, some waterproof matches and other essentials for a foray into the forest -- should Adelaide need to do so.

She would not tell either man of her final destination; this was certainly for the best, lest Albert be allowed to beguile them, and gain that information for himself. Rather, Adelaide would simply thank them for all they had done, apologize for the fates of Angus and Martha, and then move along, alone, to travel the next leg of her journey.

"No dogs," declared the driver of the former school bus, in a rough German accent.

"He's my seeing-eye dog," retorted Adelaide.

"If that's true," the man then asked, "why is he down there, and you are up here?"

"I'm far-sighted."

"Doesn't that mean you cannot see close to you?"

Adelaide cursed herself for her intellectual failing. She went for bluff and bluster. "No," she insisted. "It means that I cannot see far away, and that's why I need the dog."

The driver was unconvinced, but thankfully unwilling to prolong the argument any farther. "Okay, okay. But he better not bite anybody."

Surveying the empty bus, Adelaide retorted, "There's no one here."

"I meant me."

Rumsfeld climbed up the steps, and into the bus; Adelaide moved to follow.

"Hold on," said the German, holding his arm out to prevent her passage. "That will be twenty-three fifty."

Adelaide paid gratefully, but he did not let her pass. "What is that?"

"What is what?"

"In your coat. Do you have a rat in your coat?"

"No," she stated without elaboration, and tried to move past him.

He would not permit that. "What is it, then?"

She did not speak.

"If you do not show me, I will call the constable, and have you thrown off the bus."

Since there would not be any further transportation until the following day, and the same gentleman would likely pilot that, Adelaide was forced by necessity to comply.

"What is that?" he inquired, looking at Gig inquisitively.

"He's a guinea pig."

"Pig?" The driver fumbled beside his seat, eventually withdrawing a tattered booklet. He flipped through it, mumbling to himself, and then spoke once more. "That will be another twenty dollars."

"Twenty dollars? For a guinea pig?"

"For a pig, yes."

"Guinea," Adelaide both clarified and protested.

"Pigs is pigs," the driver declared, punctuating each word with clear emphasis. "The schedule says that pigs is twenty dollars."

"Pigs are pigs," Adelaide corrected.

"Twenty dollars."

She searched for the money; there was to be no convincing this man otherwise.

"You're expensive," she chided Gig, moving to the rear of the bus. They were all then treated to a comprehensive tour of the Canadian Prairies.

It was very white.

Occasionally, the bus would stop at a petrol station, or a general store where cargo would be placed on, or a person, although during the eight-hour excursion there were only one of these, and two genuine, snorting pigs, each paying a twenty-dollar fare.

"Piggy," said Adelaide at one point, to Gig, quietly: "meet the piggies." Sensibly, Gig did not wish to be formally introduced to such ill-mannered beasts, and, quite frankly, was offended greatly by the comparison.

For his part, Rumsfeld would be polite, and despite the toll the voyage took upon Adelaide's tender rump, they would arrive at their first transfer point, a diner within which the menagerie would wait for their onward transportation to arrive.

Adelaide would eat her fill of deep-fried potatoes, hamburgers, hot-dog's and the like, the latter chiefly ingested by Rumsfeld in an odd linguistic example of figurative cannibalism. Gig would eat lettuce, and they would stay warm for the three hours that passed while they pondered the meaning of life, and the magnificence of Canadian food.

"I love dogs," said the second driver, smiling broadly and rubbing Rumsfeld liberally upon various parts of his body. "And what's that? A guinea pig? Adorable. My daughter has a guinea pig."

There was no additional charge.

Long into the night, another eight hours passed, with Adelaide the only other human aboard the bus; consequently, the driver talked at her for the duration, undeterred by the young woman's lack of responses. He described his family at some length, their affairs, as well as the concerns of his friends, relatives and vague acquaintances.

Despite the pedestrian nature of his verbosity, it made the time go quickly, and Adelaide was soon chewing deep-fried potatoes once more, Rumsfeld swallowed that which farcically claimed to be a product of his own species, and Gig ate lettuce.

Two hours later, a third bus was boarded, with little fuss.

This coach would terminate at Red Deer, an Albertan city halfway between Calgary and Edmonton. From there, Adelaide would be free to obtain transport in her chosen direction, presumably safe from pursuit, and able to proceed to her destination.

Meanwhile, Bill and Jimmy stalked Albert Johnson, the assassin found heading away from Taylor Lake without any obvious direction. In retrospect, this might have been his strategy; having found the cabin abandoned, and making some astute predictions regarding Bill's tendencies, it could be assumed that Albert's erratic actions were not simply those of a lost wolf attempting to recapture the scent of his pray, but rather a fishing expedition intent upon flushing out his own predators.

Had Bill elected to not be so ironically ensnared by such a clever trap, the trail might have ended there, and Mister Ajax would have been robbed of any opportunity to continue his chase. Adelaide's quest would conclude, unmolested by his wicked intentions; good would triumph, with evil defeated.

This was not, and would not be the case.

"You're exiling me?" Cougar could not believe his own, well-tuned ears.

The other creatures stood silent, while Eagle moved to explain. "We simply cannot afford you as such a liability. Your obvious hatred for the humans is certain to lead to confrontation with them, and then them with us."

"They burnt down our home. Twice!"

“And they’ll do a great deal worse if you kill one of them in retribution, which you are quite likely to do, if given the chance. No, you must go.”

“As you wish,” Cougar growled. “But, understand this. These humans will do as they wish, and that includes kill all of you. Do not think that they won’t. One evil deed does not signal the death of a conscience, but two spells clearly its demise.

“Your only hope is to flee, far away, to a place where the humans will not venture for time enough that you live your lives without further interference.

“This will need to be quite far away indeed.”

One such as Adelaide Pemberton might need to do similarly in order to avoid the fast approaching wrath of an assassin named Albert Johnson.

INTERLUDE TWO:

ANOTHER CUP OF TEA.

“IS THAT THE SUM TOTAL OF IT?”

“Well, sir, it has not been terribly easy to translate Adelaide Pemberton’s use of vernacular. For example, she refers to the motor carriage transportation as giving her the urge to ‘spew’ and ‘hurl’; the first word has no known definition, and the second is a verb that has no subject.”

“As well as that may be,” said Bernard, taking a sip of his cup of tea, “the community will be reluctant to continue to fund your research if you fail to complete this project before the appointed time.”

Judith glowered. “If your committee will not approve my work for public distribution, that point is moot.”

Bernard placed down his tea, and leaned back in his chair. “There has been some movement, recently, in your favour; although, I assure you, it has not been my doing. As far as I am concerned, your insistence upon humanising creatures that could only laughingly be referred to as such is pure fantasy, and should not pose as scientific research.”

“They were human!”

In turn, he also raised his voice. “They were animals! Selfish, gluttonous beasts, out for only themselves. ‘Dog eat dog,’ they would say. ‘Every man for himself,’ they would say. Do you deny this?”

She stood, and he rose to meet her. “You cannot tar every person with the same brush.”

“Are those who are not complicit in the action of another not equally guilty of it?”

"How, sir, do you propose that the people of the day might have fought those such as the Smiths? You cannot, by definition, charge a man for failing to oppose an unstoppable force."

Choosing not to rebut, he merely narrowed his eyes, and then took his seat once more.

The water clock dripped away several minutes, then; Judith eventually sat as well, and the pair sipped at their tea.

"There is further news from America," he said, eventually.

Judith raised her eyebrows. "Regarding your ghastly excavations?"

He sighed, unwilling to resume that argument. "As you like, madam. This is why I am here. I do not, after all, simply attend for the foul brew that you masquerade as 'tea'."

She opted to allow that offence to pass, along with a number of seconds. "Well?" she demanded, finally, brusquely.

"To your credit, were it not for your research the team would have discarded the evidence they had found as coincidence, sheer happenstance. As you know, Albert Johnson was found buried in a shallow grave, dug far from any evidence of widespread settlement."

"He was." She seemed impatient.

"Well, when the team went to repatriate his remains, after more strenuous examination, they noticed a small bone poking from the soil. They chose to excavate further, and expose the creature to which the bone belonged. At first, they thought it was a rodent, of the wild variety, simply come to its end in the general vicinity."

"But then?" The impatience was growing.

Bernard took a healthy sip of the same tea he had previously denounced. "Under further inspection, it was revealed to be a rather good example of domestic *Cavia porcellus*."

"A guinea pig?" Judith's eyes grew wide. "A guinea pig, in the grave with Albert Johnson?"

"Indeed."

CHAPTER TWENTY:

A DOG NAMED GIG.

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a pup, of white, black and brown, with an adorable pink nose.

This pup was born larger than most, and had a nose larger than most, and an appetite larger than any of his siblings, or relatives of any persuasion, for that matter. One might have called him a pig, if one knew what a pig was -- he, of course, did not.

Truthfully, he did not even know what he was.

His understanding was limited. The pup knew that, despite his size relative to those like him, he was small, especially in comparison to the gigantic creatures that frequently roamed about. He had fur, unlike those behemoths, and four paws on which he stood -- the giants stood only on two.

Discussing the matter with his kin failed to shed any further light on the matter, for they did not know, either. Indeed, all any of them knew was that they existed -- their origin, beyond the world they presently inhabited, was a topic that was entirely devoid of fact, rumour, or even reasonable conjecture.

Frankly, his family did not care all that much. The pup was extraordinarily intelligent, and inquisitive; although those might be seen by us as admirable traits, amongst his kind, whatever they were, he was merely seen as an annoyance, a disruption to the common contentment.

"Why do you care?" they would say; "We eat, we grow, and then we reproduce, so that our offspring may eat, and grow, and so on. This is all we know, but it does not matter, for we are happy."

The pup would beg for their indulgence. "But," he pleaded, "if we knew more, if we expanded beyond our metallic homes and took in whatever exists outside our world, we might grow not only in size, but in thought as well. Then, our offspring would learn, and their offspring would learn, and soon we would be able to do such wondrous things --"

“All we want to do is eat, grow and reproduce.”

The giants kept them -- this was a fact of which the pup was very quickly aware. They would resupply his kin with food, and replenish the water at regular intervals. His home was cleaned when necessary, and he was left with little to do besides eat, grow and, perhaps eventually, reproduce.

Occasionally, those caretakers would offer the pup a different culinary fare, one that was tough, and chewy, but that he could not resist consuming. This resulted in peculiar bowel movements, and then the hair on his belly would fall out, but his relations thought nothing of it -- to them, it was simply ‘part of the natural order’.

Convinced that this strange event was definitely not typical for his species, whatever that might be, the pup decided that, since his fellows held little academic value on that subject, he would instead interact with the giants, and attempt to learn more about this bizarre digestive function.

Getting their attention was difficult.

He would jump up and down, but then so would his siblings, as if they were corn kernels popping in a hopper. This behaviour was apparently commonplace, and was disregarded by the giants. The pup would stick his nose through the metal bars that walled his home, and seek attention, but then his fellows would do likewise, in a seemingly instinctive mimicry -- the chin rubbing with which he was consequently rewarded was pleasant, but unproductive.

Displaying his advanced intellect was proving to be a more complex matter than he had anticipated. He needed to discover some capability that would set him apart, and indicate his uniqueness so that the giants would recognize his superior faculties, and engage him in dialogue.

The problem remained as to what that might be. Although slightly larger in girth than his fellows, he did not seem to possess any extraordinary physical traits. He could not fly, for example, nor walk on his hind legs. He found that he could pick objects up in his front paws, but his kin quickly adopted that ability, once demonstrated, en masse -- this was not seen as deviant behaviour by their caretakers, who granted them no additional concern.

He thought, and ruminated, and considered, and thought, for minutes, then hours, and then days. He watched his family as they went about their business, and studied that behaviour scrupulously, working to discover something that, with his intelligence, he might be able to accomplish that they would not.

Then, he came to a dramatic realization.

They could not climb.

It was not that they chose not to -- his kin were simply incapable of doing little more than scrambling up onto the roof of the wooden hut in which they slept, and even this was a very haphazard affair, showing a distinct lack of dexterity. They could certainly not scale the bars that comprised the walls of their home; this was plainly beyond them.

However, with proper forethought and consideration, the pup concluded that he might be able to do what they could not, and climb that wall, showing to the giants that he was not to be taken lightly. He spent days calculating, determining how he might overcome his inherent deficiencies, and, by making careful plans with precise movements, he would do so -- when a giant was by to replenish their food.

The pup methodically scaled the bars, and then held on, proudly, at the summit of his home while the giants mingled about, witnessing his prowess. He would be discounted no longer; his superiority was recognized, and he would be granted the audience he so desperately sought, in the guise of an older giant, one whose cries sounded slightly different from the others.

This giant would remove the pup from the only world that he had ever known, and spirit him away to one that held so many complexities, that even his advanced intellect would become befuddled at all of it. He would be amazed and delighted, and be permitted to roam free, in the home he shared with the kind, old giant who had chosen to grant him such tremendous privilege.

Unfortunately, this failed to answer the question of just what, exactly, he was.

Communication with the giant was very restricted. It seemed to be incapable of discerning the subtleties of the pup's speech, and regarded everything he said to have primitive

explanations -- merely expressions of distress, or hunger when he meant far more.

The giant in turn merely repeated the same cry over and over again: "Wilbur," it would chant, basic intentions detected in its inflection of approval, and disapproval, but little beyond that.

Complex discourse was simply not possible with the beast. How nature had led to this perplexing arrangement was beyond the poor pup, but he was given little time to contemplate this paradox, for before he knew it, he was bundled away within the great coat of the giant, and carried along whilst the behemoth appeared to flee his fellows at a great rate of speed.

The issue of his origins discarded for the moment, his thoughts turned to the present crisis. To this point, his life had been comfortable -- there had not been any significant changes in ambient temperature, nor exposure to the elements; however, this was no longer so. It was cold, and the wind howled about him, and all he could do was huddle and shiver within the giant's great coat.

His instincts told him to run, to flee, but he was in no position to do so, and could only remain where he was, with his poor little heart racing, and his lungs breathing so quickly that his nose chapped in the dry, cold air. Complex thought became impossible under such circumstances, and he would not be permitted any relaxation until they reached shelter within a tremendous structure, within which the giant constructed a smaller temporary home for his passenger, like the hut.

The pup was not happy, and protested recent events at some length, at which some form of response came from the giant, little of which was understood beyond the danger and urgency contained within its cries -- the pup could only concede to that which apparently saw itself as his protector, and submit to circumstances as they were.

Some time would be spent, there, in his temporary home within the tremendous structure, while the giant grew fur on his face, and strove to alter his cries -- to what end, the pup did not know, but could only venture to guess that his protector wished to avoid recognition by his kin.

This was very accurate speculation.

An odd event occurred here. The pup was presented with some of the tough, chewy substance that he had previously consumed when younger, and became concerned once again at the result, the clear pellets that seemed foreign and unnatural. However, this unease became resoundingly overruled when the hair on his tummy fell out, and his protector subsequently did unspeakable things to it.

It hurt.

The pup writhed, and screamed his pain but it was to no avail -- the giant persisted in its vile efforts until it was finished violating his poor belly, marking it with symbols the pup did not understand.

Forgiveness for this transgression took some effort on the part of the giant. The pup bit its paw several times to discourage any further assault, but he was under no illusion that should the giant wish to harm him again, it could readily do so. His so-called 'protector' became generous with both the quality and quantity of the food that it offered, and provided constant affections that the pup was soon unable to rebuke.

Through these methods, their relationship was promptly repaired.

Eventually, they would continue on, the dangers they faced known only to the pup through the dramatic changes in his protector's heartbeat. By this measure, it seemed that, at one particularly perilous point, they were doomed, and the pup prepared for his end, still not knowing just what, exactly, he was -- but it was not to be, and soon, the giant upon whom he rode placed him into a sack, and they both travelled within a much larger, mechanical beast directed by another, apparently friendly giant.

He was hungry, and he expressed that, often, for his appetite could seemingly never be satisfied. The pup began to grow at an alarming rate, and required great quantities of sustenance to do so.

The giant was not always prompt with his rations.

Given the circumstances, the not-so-much a pup found this forgivable, when the delay was not critical. He was soon transferred into a new home within another of the mechanical beasts, not as large as his previous abodes, but not as cramped as the coat, or the

sack. Sadly, this beast moved constantly, frequently changing direction, and Wilbur was not terribly fond of this activity.

He would become quite dizzy and nauseous, unable to move, or even think for hours on end -- he could only sound his alarm at the situation, much to the annoyance of the giant, who was quite unsympathetic. Reprieve would be granted for only fleeting periods of time, and then the beast would race away once more.

Happy was he when the mechanical beast was stabled, and a new giant, one on four legs, such as Wilbur, became employed in his protector's enterprise. This giant, one whose movements were much easier to stomach, would take them to their destination, where Wilbur would finally discover just what, precisely, he was.

Time would pass; he would eat, and he would grow. Then, one day, his protector would pass that privilege on to another guardian, one still a giant, but much smaller, and with a higher pitched cry.

This protector had a four-legged protector of its own.

"Hello," it said.

Wilbur was thoroughly taken aback. "Greetings, friend!" he gushed, happy to once again understand, and be understood. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Nice to meet you, too. Welcome to the family," it said, curtly.

"And a pleasure it is to be here, I must say."

"Adelaide will take good care of you," it stated, firmly.

Wilbur assumed his new friend must be referring to the smaller giant, and nodded in acknowledgement, or would have, if he could have done so.

"May I ask your name?" he inquired, then. "My previous protector seemed to refer to me as 'Wilbur,' if I comprehended it at all correctly."

"Rumsfeld," it said, proudly.

“Ah, ‘Rumsfeld’, a wonderful name.” A pause, before a careful resumption: “Might I ask, if you don’t mind my badgering, as to just what, precisely, you are?”

It laughed, or performed some approximation of jocularly. “I don’t mind at all. I’m a dog.”

“Male, or female?”

“Male,” he declared, loudly.

“A male dog. And, would you mind telling me what I am?”

Rumsfeld looked at Wilbur oddly. “You mean, you don’t know?”

Disappointed: “No. That is to say, I know I’m male, but I don’t know of what species I belong.”

“You’re an orphan?”

“No, but my family had no awareness of what they were, either.”

Rumsfeld contemplated for a moment. “Well,” he said, tentatively, “I understand you, so you must be a dog, too.”

“A simple deduction,” Wilbur agreed, after some thought of his own. “Well, then, I must say that I am happy to know you, my fellow dog, Rumsfeld.”

The giant, Adelaide, a human female, Rumsfeld informed him, would carry Wilbur to her castle, with Rumsfeld leading the way, satisfied that this latest addition would provide security for his charge when he could not. He would have to teach the new dog a few tricks, however.

“Gig”, said Adelaide, with as much frequency as his prior protector had said “Wilbur.” The implication here was obvious, even to Gig.

Months passed, and Gig grew larger. Not as large as Rumsfeld; Gig estimated that it would be a very long time before he could attain such an enormous size, but he was confident that he would do so -- eventually.

Meanwhile, Rumsfeld taught Gig how to bark -- this took some patience on the part of the older dog. Gig would learn to bare his teeth, and emit a low rumble, something like a growl. Satisfied, Rumsfeld would task his subordinate with guarding Adelaide when he was not able, at a gathering of similarly smaller giants that took place for six hours, five out of every seven days.

Years passed, and Adelaide grew larger. Not as large as his previous guardian; Gig estimated that it would be a very long time before it would attain such an enormous size, but he was confident that it would do so, eventually.

Then, one day, Adelaide would present Gig with some of the chewy, tough substance that he had consumed as a young pup, and wondered at the consequence. He had not considered this bodily function since then; having been far more concerned with other affairs, this matter had fallen to the mental wayside, unimportant.

That was, until it happened again.

Rumsfeld was of no help on the subject. This did not happen to him, he said -- he would frequently eat some of the tough, chewy substance himself, but it exited in roughly the same condition it had entered, if a little worse for wear.

Then, the hair on Gig's belly fell out, and he remembered the sad affair of the pain, and the strange symbols.

Age had not imparted any further ability to decipher the meaning of the inscription, burnt into his tender belly, but his protector and charge, Adelaide, appeared to have some recognition of it, growing agitated and flustered at the revelation once revealed. He would be placed in a dark cave, next to a roaring, fiery beast, and then spirited away, his guardian's heart betraying their mutual circumstance.

They were fleeing once again.

Gig knew the signs; they would be forever ingrained in his psyche, the giant's behaviour in this arena transparent to him. His guardian was again prey -- they both were, but he was not helpless this time, for he had grown; he knew that he was a dog, and he could bark, growl, bite and scratch in defence of himself, and his charge, Adelaide.

He would be given that chance.

MELODY AYRES-GRIFFITHS

Then, he would die.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE:

CONSEQUENCES.

“LOOK OUT, DAD!”

“Brace yourself!” Joe hollered, as he promptly realized the source of his son’s warning -- a farmer’s fence emerged from the fog of the blizzard, signalling that they had gone terribly off course.

The police vehicle lurched as it dove nose-first into an irrigation ditch preceding the fence, and Jeremy, arms crossed in front of his head as his father had directed, was spared from any serious harm. Joe was, as well -- at least, of any severe injury.

“Fiddlesticks,” Joe did not precisely say, after his nose had embraced the steering wheel in a violent, uncontrolled fashion.

“Good job, Dad,” came the sarcastic congratulations of his passenger.

“Thanks, son,” Joe said, holding his head back whilst waiting for the bleeding to subside.

They had been urgently travelling to the homestead of Angus and Martha when the storm had beset them, suddenly, and the snow had forced them to slow their pace substantially. Unfortunately, this precaution had not been of sufficient measure to prevent the calamity that the pair presently faced.

“Looks like this storm could settle in for a while,” observed Jeremy, perhaps redundantly.

“Let me try the radio.”

It was soon learned that Jeremy’s astute opinion was shared by the operator of the local ‘tow-truck’, a vehicle intended to disentangle motorists from difficult situations such as the constable’s present circumstance. He refused to attend them until the blizzard passed, lest he end up participating in a similar fate. The police officer responsible for Crabhole Creek was equally

reluctant to venture out, and despite Joe's pleas would not pay a visit to Angus's farm until after the weather calmed.

Without assistance, Joe felt certain his brother was doomed.

"What possessed you," he growled, angrily, "to involve Angus in this?"

"You didn't think it was serious a few nights ago," Jeremy shot back. "You thought it was a joke."

Joe struck the steering wheel, with his hands, in frustration. "Fiddlesticks," he did not precisely say, once again.

"Well? What now, Mister Constable, sir?" Jeremy waited patiently whilst his father thought.

"We have glow-sticks," he began. "We use them to flag down the next passers-by."

"Maybe we can stop them from falling into a drainage ditch!" Jeremy smirked.

"That would be the idea, smart-aleck. And, maybe, they could give us a lift so that we might prevent your uncle from being brutally murdered by a psychopath."

"You're so smart," Jeremy grinned. Joe tussled his hair.

"Alright, then, let's get to work."

Meanwhile, Peter was beginning to sober up. This was not a pleasant experience, somewhat akin to having one's brain attempt to exit the head through the ears.

Despite his intense pain, he continued to search through the Henderson residence so that he might discover the location of 'Uncle Angus', and proceed there directly -- or, after the storm subsided, since there was minimal ability to travel in any safe fashion.

Finding little success, he attempted to contact Joe by telephone, but the service was unavailable, likely disabled by ice, or a fallen tree-limb. Even mobile telecommunications were non-functional, also a victim of the blizzard's wrath.

At this rate, power would be out soon. He intensified his search.

Joe stood out in the tempest, the chemical reaction within the 'glow-sticks' generating an eerie green radiance at the end of his arms while he slowly waved them upwards and down, impatiently waiting for another so foolish as he to emerge from the white fog that presently enveloped him in nothingness.

Jeremy's mobile telephone was unable to connect to the network, and repeated efforts to contact Angus via radio were considered unwise; they did not wish to alert Albert Johnson of their, albeit stalled, progress toward him. It had been hoped that the assassin would interrogate his uncle, and that Angus would resist -- this would give Joe and Jeremy the time they needed to reach the homestead, and pounce upon the perpetrator.

This was, of course, before the fence, and the irrigation ditch.

"Any luck?" asked Joe, climbing into the rear seat of the police vehicle. Jeremy shook his head to the negative. "My nose is frozen," the constable lamented. "Your turn."

Jeremy took the glow-sticks from his father, and ventured out into the storm.

He was a fool. He should not have permitted Adelaide to leave Suffield, and faced Albert Johnson on familiar territory -- instead, he sent her away, unwilling to grant the situation the gravity it warranted. Mister Ajax was simple to deal with, after all. One only need 'sock him in the nose' every time he strayed out of line. How much trouble could he be?

When Jeremy woke up in Albert's basement, however, he came to the abrupt realization that things were not as straightforward as he had previously anticipated.

Instead, Tanya was in hospital, Adelaide was in serious danger, Uncle Angus, and, god-forbid, Aunt Martha might be dead, and he was standing out in the frigid cold, waving a pair of glowing, green sticks, unable to do anything about any of it.

In the meantime, Peter was learning far more about the Henderson's than he cared for.

Nothing was sacred; he had gone through virtually every document, or piece of correspondence he could find, and to no avail. The house had been thoroughly ransacked, a condition for which he would leave a note on the door, in apology, once he was prepared to depart, and knew exactly where he was departing to.

The attic was the last resort, and, unlike the sparsely furnished Pemberton loft, the Henderson's had years upon years of storied history there. It would take Peter some time to work his way through such numerous stacks of so many boxes, but the time required was decidedly available -- the storm would see to that.

Three hours and four exchanges with his father later, a pick-up truck approached Jeremy, nearly running him down, the young man lost within his own thoughts.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Stop!"

Thankfully, it did so, and the middle-aged man inside, a resident of Suffield named Ed Krug, was known to them. "Stuck, eh?" he mused, perusing the Henderson's predicament. "Won't be getting out of there without a tow, I'd imagine."

"Yeah," Joe agreed. "Where are you headed? We need to get to Crabhole Creek."

"I'm heading up that way, yeah. I can't get hold of my mother; all the phones are out, and I'm worried she'll freeze if the power goes. Otherwise, no way would I be out in this disaster."

Successfully petitioning for transport, the Henderson's climbed into Ed's truck, and they slowly proceeded towards Crabhole Creek, and what they might find there.

Looking through his neighbours' possessions had given Peter plenty of opportunity to digest recent events. Apparently, Albert Johnson was after Adelaide, or, more specifically, Gig, the guinea pig given to his daughter by Mick Hervey -- or, more accurately, Alistair Dennison.

This had taken Peter by complete surprise.

Not that Mick Hervey was Alistair Dennison; he knew that, of course -- he had realized it the morning of the day that Alistair died, and had confronted his father-in-law that afternoon.

Peter had been quite angry.

He had a number of complaints; first, Alistair's part in the demise of his marriage to Julia; second, Alistair's part in his leaving Vancouver; third, Alistair's ongoing deception, for so many years, of Mick Hervey without even a single word to Peter to indicate otherwise.

Honestly, it was no wonder Peter killed him.

In any event, it was unintentional -- Peter was not, at least then, a bloodthirsty savage. He returned, early in the evening, to resume their discussion of the earlier afternoon, and the argument had quickly become heated. Peter went to strike Alistair, and they became locked in a struggle, one that had ended with Dennison striking his head forcefully upon the concrete floor, killing him.

Although not murder 'per se', the law of the day referred to this behaviour as 'manslaughter', and considered it to be a serious crime, punishable by years of incarceration. Not wishing to find himself in such captivity, and away from Adelaide, all he had remaining to him on this Earth, Peter elected to conceal the truth, and manufacture a plausible explanation for Mick Hervey's unforeseen demise.

When Constable Henderson had declared the Australian's misfortune an accident, Peter felt certain that the affair was completely over and done with -- there would be no consequences, and no further disturbances to his mundane, alcoholic lifestyle.

That was, until the meddling Madeline Greensborough had opted to intrude.

Approaching Angus Henderson's homestead, the white fog began to turn a smoky grey, until a defined plume became clearly evident, and the grim outline of the house, roof collapsed and the structure barely standing, came into view.

Joe leapt from Ed's vehicle, intent upon running into the inferno, and rescuing his brother, but the intense heat prevented him from doing so; all he could do was stand, and watch as Angus's home burned.

"I have to go," Ed said to Jeremy. "I can come back for you, in a while?"

“Don’t worry about it,” Jeremy replied. “We’re not going back to Suffield. Not yet.”

“Suit yourself. Hope your uncle’s okay, and not in there.”

“Thanks.” Jeremy smiled weakly, before departing the motorcar, to join his father in silent vigil over the charred remains of what he knew, in his heart, to be those of his Uncle Angus and Aunt Martha.

After a while, they would sit in the barn, that structure untouched by the fire, and wait for the storm to pass, revealing that there was naught left but embers, and no evidence to examine.

“I guess that’s it,” sighed Joe, in defeat. “If Adelaide survived, there’s no way of telling where she went.”

“If she followed my instructions, she would have asked Uncle Angus to send her to someone I don’t know, in case this happened,” said Jeremy, unwilling to concede. “That doesn’t mean he sent her to someone *you* didn’t know.”

“Jeremy, that’s not a large list,” Joe retorted, forming his fingers into a zero.

“There has to be someone, someone I’ve never met, or you’ve never told me about. Someone Uncle Angus might only see occasionally, someone far away.”

“But not too far,” Joe contemplated. “You know, Jeremy, I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

“That’s okay. I didn’t really believe it either. Otherwise I would have gone with her.”

Joe frowned. “Then, you might be dead, too.”

“Frankly, Dad, if Adelaide’s in trouble, I’ll probably wish I was.”

“Don’t talk like that!”

Tears welled up in Jeremy’s eyes. “I can’t help it, Dad. I love her.”

Joe had nothing with which to console his son, and could only hold the boy close to his heart. “I know, son. I know.”

Christmas cards.

There were many of these festive expressions of goodwill, an entire box replete with them, in fact. If there is any single place where one might find all the street addresses of an individual's family tree, this would be it -- assuming, of course, that they were considerate enough to keep the original envelopes.

As had recently become obvious to Peter, Joe typically discarded very little.

Happily, the envelopes were indeed there, and it did not take long to find one whose return address was Angus R. Henderson, resident of Crabhole Creek, Saskatchewan.

Excited, Peter dashed for the exit. Properly informed, he would soon be capable of rescuing Adelaide, and the day would be saved; then, they would all live happily ever after.

Irksomely, Mother Nature was not at all helpful in this endeavour.

The storm was still raging, and consequently, Peter could not travel anywhere. Left with an idle mind, he promptly found himself in a battle with his desire to drink; his desperate addiction was pitted against the love he felt for his daughter, and the need to stay sober, so that he might depart not one vital moment after the blizzard had finally subsided.

This was a hard-fought war.

Anxiety rising, his palms instantly became drenched with sweat. The spirits no longer numbing the accumulated pain, his head pounded due to chronic dehydration. His stomach turned around in his abdomen, and his heart palpitated. Further, the electricity had failed -- his furnace no longer functioned, and he was cold.

Alcohol could fix all of these problems, and in a few, brief drinks, he would feel normal again, safe and warm.

Unfortunately, he also knew that if he should choose to do so, he would not be able to stop.

Peter would drink until he was drunk, and then he would collapse into unconsciousness while Albert Johnson, or whoever that villain truly was, killed his daughter, and destroyed his soul.

He mustn't do that. He must resist, so that his faculties remained at readiness. In its place, Peter drank his fill of water, and then vomited it into his toilet, his body not tolerant of excessive non-alcoholic beverages due to years of abuse. Beaten, he collapsed, and he cried. He surrendered to his demons, and then trudged, like a man condemned, to his study, where he poured himself a drink, and a ray of sunshine warmed his face, as if a singing voice from Heaven.

The storm had stopped.

"Come on, Dad," Jeremy implored. "It's time for us to go."

"Go where?" Joe remained on the ground. "Don't you understand? There's nowhere to go. I have absolutely no idea where Adelaide could be."

"Sure you do," said Jeremy, his resolve unfailing. "You just need to think."

"What do you think I've been doing?" Joe spat.

Jeremy remained undeterred. "Uncle Angus must have said something, mentioned a friend, a buddy, a pal in passing. Okay, look. What did Uncle Angus like to do?"

"Well, he liked to hunt, and with you sometimes, too. Remember that deer you shot?"

"Dad! Stick to the subject."

"Okay, okay. He liked to fish, too, but there's no good fishing around here."

"So, where did he go fishing, then?"

"Well, sometime's he'd go up to Taylor Lake, to some cabin owned by some guy from the radio --"

"Dad!" Jeremy was dreadfully impatient.

"Yeah, that was it. Bill, up at Taylor Lake." Joe laughed, triumphant at his timely recollection.

"How far away is that?"

"About a hundred kilometres as the crow flies, but close to two hundred by road." Close enough, Jeremy thought, to reach by horse.

"That must be it! Well, we're not flying, so we better get driving."

"Drive what?"

Albert Johnson had done terrible things to Angus's pick-up truck, but nothing so severe that Jeremy was unable to resurrect the contraption to marginal usefulness. "We have no electrical system," he said, "so we have no lights, and can't legally drive on the road."

"Fine, I'll arrest myself later."

"I thought you'd say that. Let's go!"

Peter burst from his house without any further thought, completely oblivious to any notion of foresight or planning, and, leaping into his underpowered Japanese motorcar, attempted to drive off without considering the thick layer of snow that presently blanketed both it, and the roadway he sought to traverse.

He needed a more robust vehicle.

Hunting for a pick-up truck to commandeer, Peter strode down the street until he spotted a likely specimen; he then rang the bell at the door of its owner -- repeatedly.

The man, who was not particularly acquainted with Peter, was unhappy to be disturbed, and did not share his caller's concern regarding the outlandish recent events that visibly crazed individual then described. Not surprisingly, he refused Mister Pemberton's request, and, in response, Peter hit him over the head with a shovel, once he had sagely confirmed that the man was alone.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, why?"

"No reason."

Whether the man was unconscious or dead meant little to Peter; he purloined the man's keys, and absconded with the pick-up

truck, heading fast as was possible towards Crabhole Creek, and some answers.

Nothing was there.

Not Joe, nor Jeremy, Uncle Angus, or even the latter gentleman's house greeted Peter when he made his eventual arrival. However, there were no motor vehicles present, either; this was seen as a positive development, for it meant that those absent might still be alive, and either following, or accompanying his daughter, Adelaide.

However, Peter had no idea where they might have gone, and his ability to discern that most important piece of information was somewhat limited, given the state of Angus Henderson's homestead.

Had he not, in his haste, neglected to collect his mobile telephone, Peter might have called Jeremy to ask. Rather, his method of pursuit would be far more primitive. Peter would simply follow the tracks, still fresh in the snow, left by the tires of the only vehicle that had evidently departed after the tempest had concluded.

He prayed that no others would venture out upon that route, and spoil this last, very tenuous connection to his daughter, and that he would find her, so that they might be together once more.

Peter swore that he would never drink again. He would revel in every moment that remained to his life, and no one, and nothing could stand between him and his beloved daughter -- not Joe, not Jeremy, not Alistair, not Madeline Greensborough and, most certainly, not Albert Johnson.

Peter would kill that last one, if given the chance, and with his bare hands.

When he had done so, he would laugh.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO:

CROSSROADS.

“NEW PASSENGERS! NEW PASSENGERS!”

Annie crowed with excitement as the occupants of the recently arrived road coach disembarked at the Edmonton, Alberta terminal. Shoulders leaning against the concrete structure, she stood outside in the night, and scrutinized each passenger very carefully; any one of them could be a threat, sent by the Powers of Evil to destroy her.

They would not be obvious; this Annie knew very well. Forces of Evil commonly disguised themselves as Innocents, or even Agents of Light -- no one was above suspicion. Were she to let down her guard, she would be dead. This is why she did not sleep, remaining always vigilant against her aggressors.

“Piggy, pudding, piddle and pork,” she said, for no apparent purpose, as a girl, in her late adolescence, departed the road coach, with a dog. This one was important, for reasons Annie had yet to discern, and definitely warranted further examination.

“Hi!” she spouted cordially, approaching the girl. “I’m Annie! What’s your name?”

The dog growled. This creature was obviously not an Agent of Light, but Annie paid the beast’s hostility no heed, for her Coat of Righteousness would protect her -- at least, for the time being.

Ignored by the girl, Annie persisted. “I asked, what’s your name?”

The young woman sighed, and stopped. “Arlene,” she lied.

Annie knew that she lied -- she had that capability, finely honed through years of experience. That the girl would tell such a basic falsehood did not immediately condemn her, but it did not endear her to the cause, either. In consequence, Annie would be forced to place this entity one level deeper into the progressively

descending categories of Evil, and one step closer to imminent confrontation.

The girl went to move on, but Annie stopped her. "Where'd you come from?" she asked.

"Regina." That was probably another lie.

"Saskatchewan?"

"Yeah," Arlene nodded.

Annie's thoughts turned inward momentarily; seizing the opportunity, Arlene ducked past her, and fled into the coach terminal.

Within were automated 'snack' dispensing machines, washrooms, a waiting area, and a few coin-operated, electronic amusements. Arlene played one of these games, availed herself of the anti-nutritional facilities, and then sat down to consume that pointless fare. Annie observed as the girl talked to her dog, and also seemingly to herself, for the coach terminal was otherwise unoccupied.

She must be a Witch, like Annie, for only Witches conversed with themselves in such a fashion. This filled her with a temporary joy, to be in the presence of one of her own, but her celebration was almost immediately tempered with the paranoia and suspicion that had always clouded Annie's life.

Arlene might have good reason for her deception; perhaps, she too was the target of Forces of Evil, but yet, she, alternatively, may have succumbed to their enticing ways, and found her way into their employ.

Sadly, perverted by Evil, Arlene could be there to kill Annie.

Annie ran into the washroom, and hid in a toilet stall whilst she worked to establish what exactly to do next. The coach terminal was her home, and her source of life; she could not leave it for any length of time, or she would die. However, if she stayed, Arlene could cast spells upon her secretly, sapping that energy until there was nothing left with which Annie could mount a defence -- the subsequent battle would end with her quick demise.

To make matters worse, the hound that accompanied Arlene was likely her 'familiar', a creature of magic bound to the Witch, and a source of strength. Annie had no such assistance; she was on her own, outcast and alone.

"Piggy, pudding, piddle and pork," she mumbled, for no apparent reason, as she peeked through the gap in the slightly ajar bathroom door toward her adversary. She was the Witch of the Sea; Annie just knew these things. Annie was, of course, the Witch of the Plains -- but her power was limited compared to the others; although a westerly Chinook wind presently bathed her land in warmth, it was still a very cold, dark, and barren place at that time of year.

The Witch of the Sea, on the other hand, was not affected by the seasons in such a way. The plot was perfect; send an assassin at Annie's point of weakness, and dispose of her quietly, sapping her meagre resources until she merely collapsed, and died.

Annie admired the ingenuity of that.

Still, she would not go without a fight. The first order of business would be to dispose of Arlene's familiar -- this would not be easy; this hell-demon looked like a 'tough customer'. He sat at full readiness, surveying all around him like a hardened soldier while his evil mistress meditated, likely attacking Annie's psychic shields metaphysically.

She would need to draw the hound away, and that would require some form of meat. Annie burst forth from the washroom, and headed straight for the exit; her destination was the hamburger restaurant one hundred meters away, her intent to procure bait for a trap.

"That will be ninety-nine cents," said the employee at the counter, placing a paper-wrapped hamburger down upon it.

"Hey!" shouted a man from the food preparation area, likely the manager, "She's not allowed in here!"

"Ha!" cackled Annie, snatching the hamburger, and summarily departing. They would not pursue her over a single hamburger; they never did. Besides, should they, her Coat of Righteousness would protect her.

She ate the bun and the scant vegetable matter, saving the meat for an endeavour of much greater importance. Annie would set a trap; propping the washroom door open, she would wait inside, and then toss the meat into the view of Arlene's hound, tempting him to retrieve it. When he did so, she would run past him, and pull shut the washroom door, locking him inside.

Then, Annie would fight Arlene on an even footing, before the Witch of the Sea could do any more damage.

The plan worked; after ten minutes, the hound's resolve failed, and he darted for the meat -- were it not for Annie's intense mental focus, she might have lost that critical moment, but instead she seized it, and the Witch's familiar was trapped.

"Let us fight, now, Witch," Annie then demanded of the meditating Arlene, breaking her trance.

"What?" said the furtively confused Arlene, obviously purporting a ruse of innocence. "I don't want to fight you. And, I'm not a witch."

Annie laughed. "Of course you are. I've locked up your familiar, so we will fight fairly. To your feet, Witch!"

"Rumsfeld?" Arlene glanced around her; unable to locate her hound, she became visibly distressed. "What have you done with my dog?"

"I've simply tucked him away, so he cannot help you commit your evil deeds. Now come, Witch of the Sea, and let us end this!"

Annie pointed her finger at Arlene, in preparation to cast a spell, and the Witch of the Sea leapt to her feet, to engage in battle. A small bundle, wrapped in what appeared to be a pair of woollen socks, then fell from Arlene's coat and onto the floor; a fur-clad head protruded from it. It rolled toward Annie, and she quickly recognized it to be a creature.

This was Arlene's true familiar.

Annie had made a mistake. The hound, 'Rumsfeld', was not Arlene's metaphysical assistant -- this was; the creature wrapped in wool, hidden within the witch's garments, was a secret weapon.

However, it was Arlene's no longer, for Annie snatched it from the floor, and fled the coach terminal, running into the hamburger restaurant, and making haste for a darkened corner deep within, where she could more thoroughly examine her precious prize.

"Piggy, pudding, piddle and pork," she mumbled, while she pulled the bundle from where she had concealed it, within her own coat, and then admired its majesty.

It stared at her, unblinking. She was not certain what it was, for she had never before seen anything quite like it. It resembled a rat, but much larger, and its face was taller, stretched vertically. The creature squealed quietly, like a pig, in mild distress but not complete alarm, although one could tell that it could erupt into a piercing siren at any moment it saw fit.

Undoubtedly, this was a beast of great power.

"Shh, little piggy," said Annie, hoping to calm the magical beast and reassure him of her kind intentions. "I don't want to hurt you; I just want to be your friend."

She found some discarded scraps of lettuce on the floor, and offered them to the creature. "Why are you bound so, little piggy? Your former mistress was so cruel. Let me help you." Annie took off the two layers of socks, and freed the familiar from its bonds. She picked him up in her hands, and admired the creature, bereft of a tail, shaped like a pear. "You're a boy piggy," she deduced. "I will call you George. Georgie Porgie."

There was a magical code written on his belly, an incantation, or a spell of enchantment. This served only to confirm her suspicions -- he was indeed a familiar, and Arlene was most certainly a witch, one sent to destroy Annie.

George squealed, and Annie tucked him inside her coat, to calm his vocalizations lest the hamburger restaurant's personnel discover her presence there -- which they did, promptly.

"Hey, you, get out of here!" shouted the manager, displeased with Annie's prior behaviour, that being the theft of the hamburger.

"I beg you, sir; there is one outside who means me great harm, and I request sanctuary --"

"I don't care, you nut job," he interrupted. "Get out of my store!"

"I demand sanctuary!" Annie repeated.

"Get her out of here!" the manager directed his employees.

Annie was then forcefully cast out, to face the definite-to-be-enraged Witch of the Sea, angered at the liberation of her previously captive familiar.

"Where is my guinea pig?" Arlene demanded angrily, walking swiftly across the pavement toward Annie. "What have you done with him?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Annie insisted, remaining fixed. "I don't even know what a 'guinea pig' is."

"I want my guinea pig!" The hound, Rumsfeld, growled.

"I'm not afraid of you," Annie said to the dog. "My Coat of Righteousness protects me from you!"

"Where's my guinea pig?" Arlene persisted, reaching Annie's position.

Annie laughed. "I've taken your power! You can do nothing to me. If you weren't a Witch, you would call the police. But, you are, and you can't, can you? Witch!" she shouted, "Witch!" She slowly backed away from Arlene and her devilish hound, towards the security of the coach terminal, then turned, and ran.

She burst inside, with Arlene closely behind. "Give me my guinea pig!" the Witch of the Sea pleaded in desperation, helpless without her familiar.

"Why? So you can destroy me? I don't think so."

"Destroy you? I don't know what you're talking about!" Even in the face of all the evidence, the Witch of the Sea persisted in her deceptions.

"Of course you don't," Annie said, mockingly. "You're here, with your hound and your familiar, for a completely innocent purpose.

By the way, what purpose, precisely, is that?"

That question apparently caught Arlene completely off guard. "I'm going to see my family," she blurted.

"Where?"

"In Calgary," she said, catching her mistake after it was too late, for Calgary was the origin of the bus Arlene had earlier disembarked.

"Liar!" Annie yelled at her. "You're an evil liar, a Witch sent by the Powers of Evil to destroy me!"

George squealed loudly in an expression Annie took to be one of agreement with her assertion.

"See? Even your own familiar confirms your evil intentions! What will you do, now, Witch?"

"I don't know." Arlene sat down, on one of the chairs in the waiting area of the terminal, evidently defeated. The hound, Rumsfeld, sat at her feet obediently.

Minutes passed, then, with Annie parading her victory, mumbling "Piggy, pudding, piddle and pork" whilst making laps around the inside of the coach terminal, a procession that was halted when Annie realized that Arlene was crying.

"Come now, Witch; that's not proper behaviour for one with stature such as yours. You will fight another day, I'm certain."

"I don't want to fight. I'm supposed to take that guinea pig somewhere. Didn't you see the writing on his belly? That's the location."

She had indeed noticed the strange markings. "Where?"

"In the mountains. That's where I'm going."

"Why?" Annie was intrigued, but still, and always suspicious.

"So this evil guy, Ajax, doesn't get his hands on him." Arlene sighed.

Annie ruminated upon Arlene's testimony for some time. If it was true, and her deceptions had been intended not to mislead Annie, but this mysterious third party, then it would be a serious

transgression not to return George, so that Arlene could complete her vital mission. On the other hand, if Arlene was simply telling more lies, then Annie could be sealing her own doom by relinquishing control of the familiar to his mistress.

“When does your bus leave?”

“Three more hours.”

These hours would pass slowly, while Annie deliberated upon her decision. “Piggy, pudding, piddle and pork,” she would mumble repeatedly, like a mantra, while she reflected upon, considered and weighed the particulars of the situation, unable to decisively determine the truth.

Occasionally, she would return to coherence and ask questions, such as what Arlene’s real name was, to which the Witch of the Sea would curtly answer that should Annie know too much, the evil man chasing Arlene would kill her, as he had the others, and so no further information would be forthcoming.

This did nothing to aid in Arlene’s cause, and merely maintained Annie’s mental stalemate.

With only a few minutes remaining before Arlene’s scheduled departure, Annie realized that she could, after all, ask George. She was a Witch, after all, and ought to be capable of simple conversation with a familiar such as he.

She moved away from Arlene, and carefully removed George from her coat, raising him up in front of her eyes, and looking directly into his. “Tell me the truth, George. Is it as she says?”

“His name is Gig.”

“Is it, now? Interesting. Okay, Gig; tell me the truth. Is it as she says?” Annie looked deeply into Gig’s eyes, and searched for his psychic voice, hoping to hear what the exceedingly charming creature had to say regarding the subject. She soon felt a yearning to be with Arlene and the hound, Rumsfeld, and a complete trust in them, as if that they were all that was good and right in the world.

If this noble creature, Gig, felt such confidence for his mistress, then she must be an Agent of Light, uncorrupted and untainted, on a mission for Good.

Annie was convinced.

"Here," she said, returning Gig to his rightful companion. "I'm sorry I caused you so much trouble."

Arlene sighed in relief, and began wrapping the guinea pig in his woollen socks. "That's okay, Annie. Believe me, if this encounter is the least of our worries, then we're in really good shape."

"There's something more you should know, a message from the Witch of the Mountains. She says to take the right path at the crossroads. Any idea what that means?"

"Not really, but lately, I have very little ideas about anything."

The road coach to Jasper arrived, and entered its berth.

"Well, good luck to you, Witch of the Sea," said Annie. "It's been a pleasure."

"Nice to meet you, too, Annie," Arlene replied, before boarding the coach with the magical creature named Gig, and her loyal hound, Rumsfeld.

Annie watched, and waved as they departed, the trio off on the next leg of their righteous journey, to stave off the Forces of Evil, and champion the cause of the Good. She would write about the incident in her Grimoire, her magical diary, and then cast all the protection spells that she could, with the greatest of hopes that her newfound friends would be triumphant in their Quest, and defeat the vile Ajax.

"Piggy, pudding, piddle and pork," she mumbled, as she observed the passengers as they disembarked from the next coach. She stood outside in the light of early morning, and scrutinized each passenger carefully; any one of them could be a threat, sent by the Powers of Evil to destroy her.

They would not be obvious; this Annie knew very well.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE:

OFF TO SEE THE WIZARD.

"I'M HUNGRY!" Gig wheeked.

"So am I, kid," Rumsfeld responded. "So am I."

"You, at least, had that faux-meat patty," said Gig.

"Yeah, and I got locked in a washroom for it, too. In a bus station. Yuck."

"Cheezus," said Adelaide, "Keep it down, you guys. You'll get us kicked off the bus."

The road coach wound its way along the mountain roads, on its way to Jasper, Alberta, Adelaide Pemberton's next destination, and the end of such marginally luxurious transportation. From that point on, life was going to prove somewhat more difficult.

Meanwhile, Adelaide had plenty upon which to ruminate. The events at the Edmonton terminal had been quite strange, and she was unwilling to merely discard Annie's behaviour as simply that of a lunatic -- perhaps, beneath that veneer of insanity lay some kind of precognitive brilliance. Nevertheless, she would not anticipate taking afternoon tea with the 'Witch of the Mountains' any time soon.

'When in Jasper, see Jasper,' Mick Hervey had written, in his encrypted ledger, set behind the banker's desk high in the loft of the Pemberton house. Adelaide intended to do just that; her plan was to spend the night in a 'youth hostel', a refuge for young travellers common to tourist destinations of the day. A bed, albeit a very basic one, would be a welcome respite from the woeful accommodations of the previous few evenings -- she was looking happily forward to it.

Presently, however, she was thrilled to merely be in the presence of the mountains and the forests that she had missed so dearly. It had been a long absence -- far too long, in her opinion, for her heart had been so muted, strangled by the loss of so many

things. Despite the dangers that lurked both behind, and ahead of her, Adelaide knew joy once again, at least for a precious few hours.

"No dogs," said the hostelier, blandly and without compassion.

Adelaide's eyebrows rose in alarm. "But, it's going to be minus fifteen out there tonight!"

"Rules are rules," the older woman retorted. "Other guests may be afraid of your dog, and," she emphasized, whilst eyeing Rumsfeld up and down, "might have good reason, too."

Offended by such a crude insinuation, Adelaide defended her noble canine. "Rumsfeld could never hurt anybody."

"I'm sure," the hostelier replied, obviously unconvinced. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. No dogs."

"Well, where are we supposed to go, then?"

"You could try the trailer park. They rent trailers by the night." The hostelier gave Adelaide directions, and then bid the girl good day, shooing her out into the cold.

"Thanks for nothing!" Adelaide shouted at the closed door, shaking her head in disbelief. "That's charity for you. Come on, Rumsfeld, let's go."

There was a problem; Adelaide certainly could not afford any other accommodation -- the modest hostel was already at the limit of her financial means. Exhausted by several days travel, she was in desperate need of a good night's sleep, and without it, Adelaide would be unable to carry on too far.

This was a major conundrum.

Left without any other options, she could only take Mick Hervey's advice, and see Jasper, hoping to discover a deeper meaning to that guidance than a mere tourist recommendation. Unfortunately, there was naught but an endless parade of restaurants she could not afford to eat at, hotels that would not extend their hospitality, and shops that offered a wide variety of meaningless, trivial rubbish such as plush beavers, and hats adorned with mock moose antlers.

It was not encouraging. ‘When in Jasper, see Jasper,’ seemed to have no value at all. Frustrated, she collapsed upon a park bench, and removed the sock-swaddled Gig from her coat, to see if maybe, like Annie, she might receive his counsel, and garner some fresh ideas.

Placing her reservations to the side for a moment, Adelaide held Gig up, in front of her, and looked deeply into his eyes.

“What is she doing?” Gig asked Rumsfeld, disturbed by his guardian’s apparent attempt at cavy-hypnosis.

Rumsfeld snorted. “I’m not sure. This isn’t anything I’ve seen before.”

“Well, it’s unnerving, and I wish she would cease this activity.” Gig wheeled, to express his discomfort.

“Quiet, pig!” growled the irritated Adelaide, shushing her obstinate companion. She sighed heavily, releasing her stare upon Gig, and lowering him to her lap. “It’s hopeless,” she moaned.

“That’s not good,” said Rumsfeld.

“You have quite the quality for stating the obvious, haven’t you, dear Rumsfeld?”

“Whoa there, little dog; there’s no reason to be insulting.”

“You’re right,” Gig apologised, “I’m sorry. This affair has tread heavily upon all of our nerves, I imagine.”

Mired in a vacuum devoid of constructive thought, Adelaide instead hypothesized regarding precisely what her fur-bearing friends might be discussing -- perhaps something in their conversation could have been of aid to present circumstances.

“Ridiculous,” she admonished herself. “Animals can’t talk; not like humans, anyway.” Subsequently unfocussed, her gaze wandered.

There was a ‘Laundromat’, with automated clothes-washing facilities, a ‘convenience store’ stocking the fried potato, and sugared, carbonated products Adelaide held so dear, a shop titled ‘Jasper’s Outfitting’ --

'Jasper's Outfitting'. Leaping to awareness, Adelaide read the sign again. It did not say 'Jasper Outfitting', implying that it was the town's outfitting shop, but 'Jasper's Outfitting', suggesting that the store belonged to an individual named Jasper.

When in Jasper, see Jasper.

"Are you Jasper?" Adelaide tentatively asked of the man behind the counter, a burly, rugged individual with a black moustache and bushy beard.

He laughed. "If I had a dollar for every time someone asked me that --"

"Well, are you though?"

"Yes," he said proudly, with a markedly French-Canadian accent, "yes; I'm Jasper."

This was a long shot to be sure. "Would you happen to know an Australian man named Mick Hervey?"

Jasper's face grew long in apparent shock. "Did you say 'Mick Hervey'?"

He did indeed know Mick Hervey, although they had not been in contact for many years. The Australian had long ago told Jasper to expect someone, but that memory had since languished in obscurity -- until resurrected by a teenaged girl, her dog and a unique little creature, bundled in woollen socks.

"What on God's green Earth is that?" Jasper had inquired of Mick Hervey, purported associate of trusted friend, and valued client, famed mountaineer and biologist, Alistair Dennison.

"This?" Mick had chuckled. "Why, my good man, this is the future!"

Jasper was unmoved. "It looks to me like nothing more than an oversized rat."

Mick grinned. "No, this is no rat; he's a guinea pig. But a very special guinea pig."

"How's that, now?"

"Alistair gave him to me, so, as you might imagine, he has an interesting parentage."

Jasper could not disagree.

"One day," Mick continued, "this little fellow will be back this way, but with someone else. When that day comes, they may need your help. Will you give it to them?"

"I will," said Jasper, after mulling it over, briefly. "For Alistair."

"You know my grandfather?" asked Adelaide, excited by that revelation. "Where is he?"

Jasper's face turned grim. "If you mean Alistair," he said, "then I'm afraid Mick told me that he's dead."

Adelaide's knees buckled, weakened by what she had learned in a few, short sentences. Mick Hervey had known her grandfather, but her grandfather was apparently dead. However, Gig was the product of Alistair's research, not Mick Hervey's -- that being the case, who had written the ledger found in the attic? Mick Hervey or Alistair Dennison?

Jasper led Adelaide to a chair. "Here, rest a minute," he said. "Relax. There will be plenty of time for everything."

"No, she gasped, "no, there's not. There's a man after me, an assassin searching for Gig, my guinea pig. I need to get somewhere. 52, 31, 20 north by 118, 19, 50 west."

Jasper consulted a map, rolling it out upon his counter.

"Yeah, I know the spot. There's an old logging camp there. But," he added, "it's unreachable."

"I have to get there!" she insisted.

He shook his head. "It's the middle of winter; the route is impassable."

"It's not winter, yet. Besides, it doesn't matter. I'm going." The stoic look in her eyes demonstrated her resolve.

"No. It's too dangerous."

"Excuse me, but first of all, you're not my father, grandfather, or even Mick Hervey. Second, all I have behind me is some lunatic killer -- the answers I need are at that camp. So, I'm going."

Jasper quickly recognized that there would be no dissuading her. "Okay then. But I'm going with you."

"No, you're not. I need to do this alone."

"Oh, you're one of those strong, independent women, eh?"

"It's not that; I just can't put anyone else at risk."

The outfitter stroked his beard. "Fine. But only if I take you the first few miles, and show you how to climb. Otherwise, you will only kill yourself."

Adelaide could not argue with such a sober proposition.

Our trio of heroes would spend the night in the company of Jasper Champignon, a former Quebecois but still proudly French Canadian. He would serve them an extensive meal, and then tell Adelaide stories of perilous expeditions embarked upon with Alistair Dennison, going on at some length regarding her grandfather's bravery and courage in those adventures.

An inconsistency nagged at the back of Adelaide's mind, but she was unable to identify precisely what troubled her so, and so she cast the feeling away, settling into a deep slumber, resting herself for the trials that still lay ahead.

She did not sleep long.

At four o'clock in the morning, Jasper would rouse the poor girl from her peaceful dreaming. "We need to use all of the daylight that we can," he explained to the unhappy Adelaide. "So we need to pack, and travel as far as we can by road before sunrise."

He would have her assemble her own equipment, so that she could easily find specific items in an emergency, and briefly describe to her the purpose for each tool, and give an example of its use. Finished, Jasper questioned her, and, when she failed his examination abysmally, forced Adelaide to dismantle her pack, and the process was repeated twice more -- with the young woman

consuming an increasing amount of caffeine in the form of 'black' coffee to encourage her memory.

His pupil's knowledge finally meeting to Jasper's satisfaction, Adelaide would don more appropriate mountaineering apparel, and they would depart, in the outfitter's 'four-wheel drive', a vehicle stationed somewhere between a motorcar and a pick-up truck', venturing forth in it as far as they could before further travel became impossible.

"Now," said Jasper, "we hike. Then, we will climb."

Hike they did, through the sunrise and into morning, climbing a switchback route up a ridge. Adelaide soon came to regret her reckless nutrition, and swore that, should she survive, she would take up a healthier lifestyle.

In the interim, however, she would simply have to make do. Jasper taught her how to scale a rock face, using hammer, spikes, ropes and pullies -- after some argument regarding the matter, the mountaineer would relent to Adelaide's staunch insistence, and reveal a harness, for Rumsfeld, that would permit the young woman to pull the dog up the cliff after her.

Jasper could not instruct Adelaide in anything more than the most basic of essentials; there was simply not the time. He did the best that he could; she learned how to start a fire with frozen wood and collected underbrush, to boil snow for drinking water, and so on.

Headstrong, Adelaide soon insisted that he allow the young woman to continue on her own; despite his pleas to accompany her, she eventually won out, and Jasper could only stand and watch while she worked her way up a rock face, hefted up Rumsfeld, and then disappeared into the wilderness.

Then, Jasper realized that she had left behind the Global Positioning System device that he had secured within her pack. He called out for her, but she did not respond -- either she was too far away, or she had discarded the GPS intentionally.

She had; Adelaide was technologically savvy, and knew that Albert Johnson likely had the contacts required to trace such devices. Suspecting that Jasper would secretly place one on her

person, 'for her own safety, of course', she had searched her gear when he was distracted with Rumsfeld.

Rumsfeld was a good dog.

At any rate, she was free again -- Adelaide would not follow the course Jasper had set out for her; the coordinates she had supplied to him were false. Her destination was indeed an abandoned logging camp, but not the one she had indicated. Research conducted with her computer prior to Adelaide's departure from Suffield had enlightened the young woman as to her destination's true location, and the route that she needed to follow.

Adelaide, Rumsfeld and Gig travelled the snow swept Rocky Mountain forests, crossed over streams flowing with water warmed by volcanic springs, and stood in awe at the majestic peaks that towered, like giants, above them. It was not terribly unpleasant; the Chinook winds kept the full force of the Arctic air at bay, and, were one able to discard the frightful events that had led to that exercise, one might have thought the excursion recreational -- a holiday.

This did, of course, only apply presuming Adelaide could find safe shelter by sunset.

As with all things, there was drama; during one difficult ascent, Rumsfeld's lines became entangled, and Adelaide was forced to descend to meet him. She could not resolve the knot, and would need to cut the lines, but could not do so while the dog remained suspended from them; the only solution was to carry Rumsfeld up on her shoulders -- this was a slow process indeed, and cost precious time.

They were exposed; there was no forest here, and a great deal more to climb before any refuge could be taken from the frigid winds certain to invade at dusk. Directly toward her intended waypoint, she made haste, hurrying as quickly as she could only to arrive, as the sun fell over the horizon, and discover that there had been a fire, and her sanctuary was nothing more than a collection of burnt sticks, naked and devoid of any foliage.

There was a crude road, cut out of the soil by heavy logging equipment, and desperate, she followed it, hoping to find a camp, a hut, or even a small grove of trees. It became dark, the winds rose, and she resorted to the pale beam of an electric torch to find her way.

Then, there was a crossroads.

There was no signage. The forward path rose up dramatically, almost as if climbing the side of a mountain's peak, and the road to the left and right was level, but nondescript in either direction.

'Choose the right path'. Was that advice literal? Or was it figurative? Was there some exercise in logic here, or morality? The wind, the dark and the cold did nothing to encourage Adelaide's thought processes; she needed to escape exposure as quickly as she could.

If this was a riddle, she could not make sense of it.

She decided the 'right path' was the right path, and moved off in that direction, praying that the advice given by the lunatic resident of the Edmonton coach terminal was accurate, or, at the very least, favoured by Fortune. Adelaide could soon make out the silhouette of trees, and was heartened; then, the flicker of flames became evident, and the young woman was absolutely delighted.

Annie had been correct, after all.

The road narrowed to a trail, and entered the forest; a few hundred meters within sat a wizened woman, tending a fire, down in a hollow, well protected from the winds that roared with their untamed ferocity.

"Welcome, Adelaide," said the Witch of the Mountains. "And good evening to you, Rumsfeld. Please, sit, the both of you; I will pour you some tea.

But first, permit me to introduce myself.

My name is Judith Burnley."

INTERLUDE THREE:

STEEPING HOSTILITIES.

“MADAM, ARE YOU COMPLETELY MAD?”

The gentleman repeatedly passed his hand over the crystal tablet, as if working to scrub away an offensive stain.

“No, sir; I --”

“That was a rhetorical question!”

Judith stood silent, with a slight pout, offended at being stifled so callously.

Bernard swore, then; that comprehensive epithet does not bear repeating here, but suffice it to say, the language employed would be frowned upon almost universally.

His baser nature satisfied, he promptly continued, with some measure of revived civility. “Madam, not only do you continue to apply advanced, modern traits to your so-called ‘people’, but now, you’ve expanded your idiocy to include common animals?”

“It is important that --”

“Then, you choose to introduce an absurd character who is obviously fictional, a fantasy --”

“Adelaide writes about Annie in her --”

“And finally, you see fit to place yourself into the narrative, breaking any remaining credibility that your manuscript may have had left to it.”

“I think a great opportunity --”

“Quiet!” Bernard howled. “Madam, are you completely mad? That is not a rhetorical question!”

The water clock counted the seconds, and minutes that passed whilst Judith chose her words, and very carefully.

She then spoke decisively, seemingly undeterred by the spectre of grim consequence.

“With all due respect, Bernard, I owe you no explanation. I will write as I like, and when the manuscript is completed, you may approve it, or not.

“Now, in the meantime, please take your filthy mouth, and leave my house!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR:

THE CHASE.

THE CABIN WAS EMPTY.

It was so rustic that the door did not even feature a lock. This made Albert's admission convenient, and without the usual fuss associated with forced entry.

He had taken a moment to admire the view of Taylor Lake, through the window opposite, when suddenly, an earthquake of some magnitude seemed to transpire. The picturesque landscape vanished, to be replaced with only sky, as Albert felt himself lifted high into the air, along with the structure he presently occupied.

A gigantic eye, obviously quite angered, appeared in the window, and the wooden beams supporting the cabin began to creak as if under extreme stress. The sound of smashing glass was heard, and a tentacle snaked its way inside, hunting for a victim, presumably Albert Johnson.

He screamed.

It was unusual for Albert to behave in such an immature manner, but these were extraordinary circumstances, and he felt confident that he would be forgiven for expressing such wretched emotion. After all, a Kraken was about to kill him -- if you were in a similar situation, you would be prone to screams as well.

Unable to flee, the tentacle wrapped around his leg, and began to drag him slowly towards the window, and his doom. The timber began to splinter with an ominous crackling; the cabin, too, was not long for this world. Albert began to pray.

His pleas were not answered.

The Kraken pulled Albert through the window frame mere seconds before the cabin shattered into a thousand pieces of wood; then, holding the assassin to the front of its huge eye, it judged him, and found the man wanting on a number of key issues, not the least of which being his humanity, in general.

Verdict rendered, and sentence decreed, it ate him.

It began with his ankle, chewing upon it as if Albert's leg was a toothpick, gnawing through the flesh and down to the bone.

He should have worn sturdier boots.

Mercifully, Albert awoke, and the nightmare swiftly faded into the depths of his mind, but the pain remained. His ankle was bruised, swollen and tender, and riddled with the impressions of teeth -- "Impossible," he thought. "It was just a dream."

Memories of earlier events returned to his mind, and he recalled the source of his malady; Albert had set out from Taylor Lake in search of his quarry, and saw a dog, far in the distance. He called out to it, and it ran closer, and Johnson had recognized it as Rumsfeld, Adelaide Pemberton's friendly canine.

The dog had led him down, into a river valley, and exploited his unreasonable assumption that Rumsfeld was genuinely incapable of inflicting any serious violence upon him by hiding behind a boulder, and subsequently assaulting Albert's ankle. Before the man knew it, he was on the ground, his tailbone complaining quite bitterly at the abrupt impact with the rock-strewn terrain, and the dog was gone.

In his wounded condition, further pursuit on foot was no longer possible, and so he had resorted to setting traps for Bill, confident that the Native Canadian gentleman would behave in a predictable fashion, and come looking for him.

Albert's faith was not misplaced. The cat-and-mouse game continued for some hours, but eventually the assassin ruled victorious, as he always had.

It was not easy to extract the desired information from Bill, but the fisherman had brought along a friend -- and, as with Tanya and Jeremy, interrogation always went better with two, interrelated subjects.

"Bus," Bill had said, before lapsing into unconsciousness, likely forever.

Hence, there Albert was, parked in front of a twenty-four hour diner, a favourite of 'semi-truck' drivers -- giant, commercial

merchandise-hauling vehicles -- and a common waypoint for road coaches.

"I'm looking for my niece," he had said to the woman minding the restaurant's counter. "Have you seen her?" A picture purloined from the school's archives was then displayed for the waitress's inspection.

"She's your niece?" There was some scepticism.

"You think a black man can't have a white niece? What are you, some sort of bigot?"

She became defensive. "No, no; I'm no bigot. Um. She was here last night. Had a dog. I think she caught the bus to Trafford."

Tired from his search, he had then taken a little nap. After all, there would be no point to any of this if he killed himself whilst driving.

His dreams had made their attempt at that effort, instead.

To Trafford he travelled, subsequently, and revealed the revelation that Adelaide had boarded the road coach to Red Deer, prior. There was a proper terminal there; the staff were greatly obliging in aiding Albert's undertaking to locate his lost 'niece', but alarmingly, a hasty departure would be required when Mister Ajax noticed that a photograph of himself was posted prominently upon an interior wall, accompanied by those woeful words 'wanted' and 'murder'.

It seemed that the Smiths had only met with limited success at containment; although the police themselves were still not liable to provide any real support to the incorruptible Constable Henderson, who was certain to be following, that very public bulletin would make Albert's inquiries a bit more difficult, since Prairie residents in particular were prone to 'take matters into their own hands'.

He most assuredly did not want to be the guest of honour at his own lynching.

Adelaide had gone to Edmonton, and Albert Johnson would follow, whilst Joe and Jeremy, meanwhile, continued their own investigation.

Asking for same at the Taylor Lake petroleum station had yielded directions to Bill's cabin; however, this rather positive development had promptly become tainted by the sour realization that it was a 'dead end' -- despite intensive scrutiny, the lakeside residence provided no clues as to Adelaide's next objective. There were tracks of people, animals and vehicles both coming, and going; however, no sense could be made from them.

It seemed that Adelaide would be on her own.

Sombrely, morosely, Joe and Jeremy were preparing to set off, back to Suffield to tally all the damage Albert Johnson had caused, when an old friend appeared, to rekindle their spirits.

Rumsfeld was indeed a welcome sight.

"Good boy!" Jeremy cheered, "good boy!" He knelt down, to reward the dog with much, if abbreviated, affection before urging Rumsfeld to lead he and his father to the girl that he loved. The canine obligingly led the pair down into the river valley, and then departed, with great rapidity.

They followed the river for the better part of the day, and well into the night, nearly succumbing to hypothermia before rediscovering civilization; shelter would be found at a small farmhouse owned by a couple of good Samaritans, and the next morning, canvassing of the area would begin, for any sign of Adelaide Pemberton.

A surprising reluctance on the part of the local Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer to help in the matter disturbed Joe, but Constable Henderson's dogged insistence led to a bulletin detailing the charges against Albert Johnson with an image, one Jeremy had secretly captured, of that man appended.

The father-son team would requisition another police vehicle, and move from farm to farm, pleading for any shred of information that might carry their hunt forward -- to their dismay, for perhaps both her benefit and detriment, Adelaide had been quite careful.

Once more, the situation became bleak, and again abandonment of the enterprise was considered, but another faithful animal would come to their rescue.

Upon visiting one particular farm, a familiar sound was heard, the whinny of a horse -- Elmore.

Joe burst into the premises to discover Bill and Jimmy, the former dead and the latter almost so. "Red Deer," he would whisper, before succumbing to his injuries, and passing into the Great Hereafter.

There was very little celebration.

Jeremy would let loose Elmore, and order the horse to return home, before departing with his father for Red Deer, and further adventures. Elmore would do as instructed, and, at a hard gallop, take a more instinctual, direct route, crossing over roads and highways; by doing so, he intersected with Peter Pemberton, who almost precipitated his own demise by running his pick-up truck into an electrical utility pole.

"Elmore," he mumbled, before regaining his senses, and dashing from the wrecked vehicle, shouting at the top of his lungs for the horse to pay him heed.

Peter had never rode a horse before; this made for some moments of comic amusement whilst the man attempted to mount the steed, and then fell off, not once, but twice. Eventually, a very tentative stability was attained, and Elmore's orders were revised -- he was to take Peter to Adelaide, with whatever strength he had remaining to him.

There was not much of that, and the going was unnervingly tedious.

Albert could not risk opening a dialogue with the personnel of the Edmonton coach terminal; although he could not spot it directly, the odds were substantial that Constable Henderson's communiqué had been received by the staff -- taking such a risk would be suicidal.

He would need to be more passive in his approach, and surreptitiously seek out any third-parties that might have noticed his prey pass through in the hours previous, persons such as the individual he presently observed, one mildly disturbed entity that wandered about aimlessly, muttering "Piggy, pudding, piddle and pork."

The sky turning dark, Elmore would take Peter to Jimmy's residence, to weather the night, and Pemberton would enter the main house, and encounter one of the more gruesome sights that he would ever have the misfortune to observe.

"Cheezus," he might have said, at the discovery of Bill and Jimmy, victims of Albert Johnson's handiwork, if he were Adelaide. "Cheezus-bloody-McCrisp."

Peter would sleep out in the stable, with the horse.

"Some guy was in here yesterday looking for her," said the attendant at the Red Deer coach terminal. "He said she was his niece, but that was a little strange, because he was black."

"You don't think black men can have white nieces?" Jeremy replied, furrowing his brow.

"Hold on, there; I'm just saying. Anyway, she went to Edmonton. That guy's wanted for murder, isn't he? Didn't make the connection until just now."

"That's a pity."

"Yeah. Anyway, good luck."

"Thanks," Jeremy said, running for the door.

Albert was becoming impatient.

"I'm Annie," repeated the mentally deranged individual, evidently incapable of processing his modest request, that being: 'have you seen this girl,' with the appropriate depiction presented simultaneously. Crows could have nested in the vacant space unoccupied by rational thought inside that woman's mind -- either that, or she was being deliberately evasive.

The only real lead he had, Albert's assessment could only continue, and as it did so, he began to gradually suspect that she was, in fact, 'putting him on'.

In a moment of inattentiveness, Mister Ajax relieved Annie of her belongings, and then, after fleeing into the toilet, rummaged through them, finding her Grimoire, and the appropriate entry, the one detailing her encounter with 'Arlene'.

Arlene, Annie had written, was going to Jasper.

With insincere apologies, Albert returned Annie's possessions, and then returned to his vehicle, with an updated heading.

Albert surmised that Adelaide was heading for the mountains; Alistair Dennison had made his epic journey through them, and were the scientist to have 'stashed his gold', as it were, it was likely he would have done so inside one of the many abandoned cabins that dotted the alpine terrain.

If the girl was engaged in aspirations greater than simply running away from him, this could potentially lead to complications that Mister Ajax would find distasteful -- he wanted this affair to end, not increase in complexity.

Therefore, it was vital that he intercept her, or the information, before any further damage could be done. Arriving in Jasper at late evening, he called upon the Smiths to employ their tremendous resources to calculate Adelaide's probable destinations; of the several hundred locations the young Pemberton had plotted into her computer, only a dozen of those existed in the proximity of Jasper.

This was insufficient. Presuming that Adelaide had already departed on the next leg of her excursion, Albert would request that global positioning information for all local motor vehicles be examined, for any that departed very early that morning, and travelled to the passable extent of regional mountain roads.

There was a match.

"How can I help you?" inquired Jasper of his latest customer, a curious gentleman of African descent who was found waiting outside the door to his shop at its opening the following morning.

"I think you know," said the man, one of suspiciously similar description to the villainous cretin chasing the young Adelaide Pemberton.

Jasper pretended to be taken aback. "I do?" he said, eyes wide with shock.

"Yes, you do."

"If you don't mind, why don't you enlighten me?" Behind the counter was a rifle. Although it was not legal for Jasper to keep such a weapon concealed, given recent events, he was concerned for his safety.

He edged toward it.

There was a painful pause. "Well, you're an outfitter for mountain climbing, correct?"

"Yes."

This patron had a flair for the dramatic. "Well, then you know why I'm here."

Jasper looked momentarily confused, and then, he laughed. "Of course, of course," he grinned, "what did you have in mind?"

The answer was curt, and obvious. "Mountain climbing."

"I know that girl," said Annie to Joe, when presented with Arlene's photograph. Unlike the nasty man who had read her Grimoire without asking permission, this policeman was not a member of the Forces of Evil; Annie could tell these things.

"Did she say where she was going?"

"Piggy, pudding, piddle and pork," Annie teased. "If you know Arlene, you'll know the name of her precious piggy."

"Gig!" Jeremy shouted, returning from the washroom. "His name is Gig."

"I think she loves you," Annie declared to Jeremy, the latter stunned at such a brash statement.

Joe chuckled. "All right, then. Where did you say this Arlene went?"

She told them.

Well rested, and guided by a superb, genetically engineered intuition, Elmore took off like a rocket, with Peter Pemberton strapped to his back like an ancient satellite, holding on for dear life.

Had Peter been aware of the horse's abilities earlier, he would have entered the steed into the races upon which the people of the day gambled heavily, and made a substantial fortune.

Elmore was that fast.

As Peter charged across the frozen Prairie landscape, Albert Johnson engaged Jasper in an at-times suspenseful conversation regarding the appropriate use of mountaineering gear. Neither man was convinced of the other's part in the affair sufficiently enough to engage in combat, and the assassin departed, well prepared for the trials ahead -- or, so he thought.

"Have you seen this girl?" panted Joe, later stumbling into Jasper's Outfitting, plainly exhausted from an endless series of inquiries at an endless series of shops.

"Why yes," said Jasper. "You must be Joe!"

"Have you seen this man?" gasped the equally expended Jeremy, following his father into the shop.

"Why yes," replied Jasper, melancholy deeply resonant within his voice. "You must be Jeremy, and that," he sighed mournfully, "must be Albert Johnson."

"Fiddlesticks," Jeremy did not precisely say.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE:

A LOYAL COMPANION.

“BUT I WANT A CAT!”

The little girl was engaged in quite the dispute with her father; the man was insistent that they proceed into the vast, cavernous room that housed a wide variety of dispossessed canines, but conversely, his child appeared to be lobbying for an inspection of the feline wing in the institution of which the poor, lost puppy was presently an unwilling guest.

She wanted a cat. There was no accounting for the girl's extremely poor taste, the puppy thought; felines contributed nothing of consequence to anyone except themselves. This was not a desirable trait in a companion; one ought to select someone strong, fierce -- a protector.

Still, the puppy had been taught the principle of ‘survival of the fittest’, and felt that it certainly applied in this case. Those who chose to adopt a cat were feeble of mind, and natural selection would eliminate them by inevitably presenting a threat that no mere feline could defend against.

If they had only employed the services of a dog, then such ugliness would not have come to pass.

Bored with the humans' ongoing bickering, the puppy lay down on the floor of his cell, placed his head in his paws, and sighed. He missed his family; the mother, brothers and sisters of whom he was rather fond were gone, erased from his life by a cruel, vile individual that had snatched him away when he had merely gone chasing a rat, emerging from the alley and on to the street where he would be apprehended.

Then, he was driven away, to this unknown place, to languish in sorrow, and pray for rescue from his imprisonment by one of the many humans who passed through the halls of his jail on a regular basis.

No one seemed to want him.

Instead, they would make completely irrational decisions. Breeds of dog that were, quite frankly, of lesser intelligence than the rat he had chased from the alley were chosen simply because the humans found them cosmetically attractive.

It was absurd!

He was born a soldier, sworn to protect and serve those who would provide him the necessities of life -- food, shelter, and a kind hand. How could these humans not see that?

The puppy sighed again.

Meanwhile, the ruckus between the man and his offspring continued unabated. She cried, and he hollered; this was not an efficient way of dealing with your child, the puppy mused, remembering his own rearing. His mother never raised her voice unless she was warning her puppies of danger; she was the epitome of kindness.

She taught all of her puppies to be selfless and brave. "The humans need our protection," she would say. "They face many predators, mostly amongst themselves. The strong prey upon the weak, which is typically the order of things; however, with humans, intelligence permits them to rise above physical limitations by defending themselves through other means.

"The smartest humans choose to befriend one of our kind, someone who will be loyal, only requiring loyalty in return, and who will defend them to the death, if necessary."

Of course, the puppy did not comprehend the concept of death, but the message was still understood. Loyalty meant that one would promote the best interests of the one to whom one was loyal by any and all methods, never withdrawing until a satisfactory conclusion had been reached.

Loyalty was all that mattered in this world.

"I want Thomas," the girl wailed, beating her fists against her father's chest. He only stood there, staring directly ahead, off into space whilst his daughter vented her apparent frustrations upon him.

"Thomas isn't here," he said, finally, placing his hands upon his daughter's shoulders, and looking down upon her. She directed

her gaze upward, and ceased her tantrum; discovering a deeper, shared sadness with her father, she relented.

"I don't like dogs," she stated. "Why do we need a dog?"

"So he can keep an eye on you. You're trouble."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Takes one to know one," she retorted. "You're not 'Mister Lily White' either."

The man ignored her, moving towards the cages opposite to the puppy. "Look," he said, "I'm sure one of these dogs will appeal to you. There are so many here."

"It's Regina," the girl said, as if stating the obvious. "It's the city of dogs."

"What about this fellow?" her father said, continuing to pay her flippant remarks no regard.

"Timmy's fallen down the well? Oh no!" -- a mocking reference to an ancient television program.

"Very funny." He moved along. "How about him?"

"A pit bull?" she gasped, eyes wide. "Are you trying to have me killed?"

"Good point. And this one?"

"A police dog? That will win me a lot of friends when I get older. Not."

The man threw up his hands in defeat. "Okay, then, I give up. Which one do you want?"

"I want a cat." On this point, the girl seemed quite insistent.

"Imagine you want a dog."

She pouted, and then moved to the centre of the room. Spinning about, she held out her right arm, finger pointing out towards the cages, until she came to a stop.

The humans walked towards the puppy.

"Why this one?" the man asked.

"Because he's so ugly, he can fend off intruders with his face."

"That's not a very nice thing to say."

The puppy understood very little of that exchange, but knew that he was to soon leave the cage, and that accursed place, for a new home; he was happy.

"What will we call him?"

"Buttface."

The man groaned. "Please, Adelaide; be serious just for one moment."

She wrinkled her nose. "All right," she agreed, tentatively, frowning her brow in deep thought.

"Rumsfeld," she said.

The man laughed. "Okay, fine. But, only because I'm impressed with your comparison, not because it's funny."

"But, it is funny."

"Come along, smart aleck."

They would travel far then, by motorcar, for several hours across the hot summer Prairie landscape, and the puppy would marvel at the never-ending seas of golden wheat, and the overwhelming sky. He poked his head through the open window, and felt the wind blow across his face for the first time, and he was pleased.

He had a family to defend, and therefore a purpose.

"What's dark, and furry, and smells like fish?"

"ADELAIDE PEMBERTON!"

"What? I meant the dog."

"Oh. Well, when we get him home, you can give him a bath, then."

That exercise certainly did little to endear the puppy to Adelaide.

"You're not a cat," Adelaide said, for the umpteenth time, whilst she sat upon the front steps of the Pemberton house in Suffield. The sun behind the building, the puppy sat on the shaded concrete that lay between the stairs and the footpath, enjoying its coolness.

He was not yet sure as to what the girl meant by 'yurnotacat', but she insisted upon repeating it quite often, so he was beginning to think that it was his name. Concluding this, Yurnotacat wagged his tail, hoping to prompt some activity from his human, such as ball chasing or running behind a bicycle, but she would not be moved, content to poke at the dirt with a stick, and say his name at regular intervals.

A boy emerged from the house astride theirs, and proceeded to walk over to them.

"Hi, Adelaide," the boy said.

"Hi Jeremy."

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

He paused. "Do you want to go down to the river?"

She considered his proposal for several seconds, while poking at the dirt. "Sure," she agreed, finally. "But, I'm going to ride my bike."

Adelaide rose, to collect her bicycle at the rear of the house.

Meanwhile, Jeremy knelt down, to 'rough house' with the puppy. He pretended to wrestle with the dog, and Yurnotacat feigned biting the boy, growling as if fighting a legitimate attacker.

Then, Adelaide shrieked in terror.

Off the puppy went, like a bullet fired from a pistol, racing to the back of the house to defend his human. Yurnotacat rounded the corner, and found himself confronted by a creature he had never before seen.

It had no body, and no fur. It consisted simply of a head and a tail, glued together with no intervening legs, or torso of any

kind. Something rattled at the end of the tail, and large fangs emerged from the mouth. It had spots.

He looked deep into its mesmerizing eyes, and for the first time, Yurnotacat knew death.

"What are you?" the puppy demanded of the devilish creature.

"Snaaake," it hissed, repeating itself. "Snaaake."

"Well, Snaaake," Yurnotacat barked, "What do you want?"

"Kiiilll," it whispered. "Kiiilll."

It would only chant those two words, over and over again, whilst dancing back and forth, its head bobbing rhythmically to that simple song. "Snaaake Kiiilll, Snaaake Kiiilll."

"Adelaide!" the man, Peter, shouted from the back porch. "Get away from there!" However, the girl was frozen with fright and could not move.

Yurnotacat paced around the snake, instinctively keeping his movements chaotic; deep within, he knew, somehow, that the serpent would eventually lash out at him, with its giant, poison laden teeth, intent upon killing him, and sending the puppy to the cold, dark place he saw in the creature's eyes.

If he abandoned his post, the snake would kill the girl -- that could not be allowed to happen. This was his purpose, and he would not forsake such a noble responsibility. However, he did not wish to die, either. Facing the contradiction of life and death, Yurnotacat could only continue his efforts to distract the snake, and pray that it would eventually break off, and slither away to pester someone else.

Sadly, rattlesnakes are not inclined to do such. "Snaaake Kiiilll," it persisted. "Snaaake Kiiilll."

"Would you please just go away?" the puppy begged, legs beginning to tire from his constant prancing. "We don't mean you any harm."

"Snaaake Kiiilll," the creature replied. Yurnotacat was beginning to suspect that the animal he faced had no mind, and that

it was an automaton, programmed only to seek and destroy -- a weapon.

He was not far off from the truth.

Rattlesnakes are not what one would call the world's most intelligent creature. They have two simple instincts -- to breed, and defend their nest. Unfortunately, since they lack the cognitive ability to distinguish otherwise, their 'nest' is wherever they happen to be at the time.

God was obviously not in the best of moods when he created that foulest of beasts.

With all sincerity, they do serve a greater purpose, controlling rodent populations on the vast Canadian plains. The question remains, though: Why make such a lethal creature so remarkably homicidal?

Yurnotacat was not, himself, particularly concerned about the finer points of the species; he only wanted the snake to either depart, or strike. Should the second option come to pass, the puppy was certain that some as-yet-unknown inbuilt trait would leap to action, and save him from his own demise.

He just failed to understand what that trait was. The snake, on the other hand, was quite convinced it could, nay would eventually kill him.

Its conviction was rather unnerving.

"Snaaake Kiiilll," it said.

The puppy was beginning to tire. He realized that this was an integral part of the snake's strategy, and that when his reflexes began to slow, the serpent would leap for him, to inject its venom, and end his very short life. Something would need to occur to alter that outcome, a stratagem of his own.

"Rumsfeld!" shouted Jeremy. "Adelaide!" shouted Peter. "Snaaake Kiiilll," said the snake.

With all of that ruckus, Yurnotacat could not even begin to think. He retreated, within his own mind, back to earlier days, with his mother in the alley. Cuddled up against her warm abdomen, he

suckled upon a teat, safe, happy, and not in the company of serpents.

Drinking his mother's milk, he took to contemplating those distant circumstances, in the future, far away. Perhaps, he thought, if he were to feign tiredness, the snake would make an unrefined, haphazard strike -- then he could bite at it, while the energy required still remained to him.

It was a risky strategy, but there were few other options available, and those were less palatable. No, this was his lot, and he would not shirk his obligations.

A few last moments of his memory were savoured, before his mind returned to the present, and the chaos that reigned about him. Yurnotacat began to waver, and falter -- his steps became awkward, and imprecise.

The snake raised itself higher, and its dance heightened in intensity, eyes radiating with anticipation of the puppy's impending doom. Yurnotacat staggered, and the serpent struck, then, lashing out at the puppy's leg.

Adelaide shrieked, again, convinced that her protector would surely die.

However, Yurnotacat was not to depart this world so easily. He bit at the snake, capturing it in his mouth, just below the head. Subsequently, the puppy decapitated the serpent, and, with nothing to control it, its extensive tail flopped about on the ground, soon subsiding.

The humans cheered, and showered Yurnotacat with great affection, and Adelaide, no longer interested in cats, would bestow upon him a new name, Rumsfeld, which he would wear with great pride, for he was no longer a puppy, but instead a noble Dog, charged with defending one Adelaide Pemberton.

He would spend the rest of his life hoping to be given another chance to prove himself.

Years later, whilst travelling through the Rocky Mountains on an expedition with his charge, Adelaide, and the little Dog named Gig, he would be given that opportunity.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: CONFESSIONS.

“WHO ARE YOU?”

Judith laughed. “That’s a very good question. I ask myself that all the time.”

“Great,” Adelaide thought, “another crazy person.”

“I’m not crazy, just mildly demented.”

Adelaide’s mouth hung open, slightly, and she sank down on to a log, fashioned as a bench. “The Witch of the Forest,” she mumbled.

“Oh, no; I’m no witch,” Judith remarked, pouring tea. “I’m a psychohistorian, actually. Here you are, dear,” she said, handing a cup of the brew to Adelaide.

The young woman grimaced. “This smells awful!”

“It’s Valerian root tea. It will calm you down. I will admit, though, that it’s a bit of an acquired taste.”

Adelaide sipped at the brew cautiously. “So, why are you here?”

“To talk with you, mainly. The pages documenting this period in time are missing from your journal.”

“My journal?”

“Never mind.” Judith tended to the fire. “So, you, Rumsfeld and Gig are out climbing mountains to rendezvous with you-know-not because of a tattoo on a guinea pig’s belly. Does that sum it up, properly?”

Tension was obvious in Adelaide’s eyes. “Drink your tea,” Judith urged. “Go on, now.”

Adelaide took a healthy mouthful. “It does, but you haven’t really told me --”

"And this seems like a rational course of action to you?"

A frown: "Some psychopath is chasing us, you know."

"That's a matter of opinion -- the psychopath part, I mean."

Adelaide elected not to dispute Judith, and instead took another sip of the foul tea. "So, I'm here but I'm not here. That's kind of confusing."

"It's a dichotomy you need not ruminate upon. Instead, let us discuss your father."

"He's a drunk." This was stated as fact.

"Well, yes, we know that already --"

"We?"

"I mean 'I'. Please don't belabour semantics," Judith snapped.

"Yes, ma'am," Adelaide saluted. "Cheezus."

"Watch your language, young lady," Judith chastised the girl. "Returning to the subject at hand: your father is much more than just 'a drunk', as you put it."

Glaring, Adelaide rebutted, "Well, if you know so much about him already, why ask me?"

"Peter Pemberton is on a slow boat to Hell," observed Albert Johnson, sipping Judith's tea beside the fire. "He's a menace not only to himself, but to the world at large. Frankly, I should have put him down before I left Suffield."

"Don't you think you've killed enough?"

He stared at her, eyes devoid of remorse. "Look, Judith, I've only done what was necessary to complete my mission, and only then, when there were no better options."

"Angus, I would note, did point the rifle at me first. Bill wanted to kill me, too. So, save your preaching for someone else."

"My conscience is clear."

"And about Peter?"

"Well, you might be better off asking his daughter; after all, he killed her precious Mick Hervey."

"Adelaide is not yet aware of that reality."

"That's too bad," Albert said.

"For her sake, I hope he stays in Suffield," said Joe, of Peter. "Mick's death might have been accidental -- the result of an argument -- but the fact that he subsequently covered it up only puts him on an unhappy path."

"He could be capable of anything."

"Could you kill Peter if you had to?"

Joe was quick to respond. "Without a second thought. He may be my friend, but he betrayed that trust when he chose to deceive me. Albert Johnson might be a cold, calculating killer, but Peter is something even more dangerous -- a desperate man."

"Adelaide, is your father a desperate man?"

"I guess so," said his daughter. "He's been on a downhill slide ever since we left Vancouver -- and Mom. I thought he might go insane eventually."

"How long have you known about his drinking?"

"For a few years now, I guess. I know, I probably should have said something, but I thought that, if he knew I knew, it might only make him ashamed, or something, and drink more."

"Let sleeping dogs lie', I suppose."

"Yeah, Peter drinks a lot," responded Constable Joe. "He's an alcoholic; I can see it in his face -- the guilt, and the pain. It's a pretty nasty vice, when it takes a person over like that."

"Makes you do irrational things, behave out of character."

"Such as, killing other people?"

Joe laughed. "Yep, that'd be definitely out of character for someone like Peter Pemberton. But, unfortunately, with regard to the man in question, it seems to no longer be the case."

"I'd kill him, too, especially if he threatens Adelaide," Jeremy added.

"No, son," Joe cautioned. "You don't ever want to take another's life. That's not something you will ever forgive yourself for."

"Judith, it's not my business to forgive myself," Albert retorted. "That's God's job, if he even exists."

"Not a man of faith, I take it?" asked Judith, tending to the kettle.

"In war, God is everywhere, but nowhere. That is, everyone believes in him, but none are saved. It's a platitude, I know, but a pertinent one."

"Is this war? This conflict?"

"I suppose it is. It's a do-or-die situation for me; if I don't deliver the guinea pig to the Smiths, they'll paint a target on my backside. That having been said, anyone who stands in the way of my success is my enemy."

"Even Adelaide?"

"I still can't believe that Ajax might have killed Angus over something as silly as Gig," lamented Adelaide. "He's just a guinea pig."

"Well, of course, he is not 'just a guinea pig'," said Judith. "You have read Mick Hervey's ledger; you do know that certain people do not find Gig's continued existence to be a tolerable condition."

Adelaide heaved a burdened sigh. "I don't care about them. To me, he's just a guinea pig. I'm only doing this to protect him. I don't care about 'saving the world'; the world can save itself. If Albert Johnson would let me keep Gig if I didn't tell anyone about the whole plastic bit, I'd swear to never mention it, ever again."

"In a perfect world," Albert sighed, "I'd accept Adelaide's offer in a second. But, unfortunately, this is not a perfect world, and it's inhabited by very imperfect people."

"You cannot trust her," Judith concluded.

"Exactly," he said. "If she got drunk, and said something to the wrong person, then not only would the Smiths be back after her, they'd be after me, and my family."

"That last one is of the utmost importance, is it not? Since you yourself are deteriorating?"

Albert chuckled. "You know everything, don't you, Judith? Yes, I'm dying. But, then again, aren't we all?"

"Albert Johnson," spat Jeremy, "I could kill without any remorse, and need no forgiveness."

"Jeremy!" barked his father. "There is never a good reason to take a life. Haven't I taught you better than that."

"You don't know what he did to Tanya --"

"I should have killed her," said Ajax. "In the past, I've drawn the line at killing children, but," he sighed, "such resolve in that one. If I had finished her, it would have been for her own good. Now, we both have to carry the memories of that terrible incident forever."

"And Jeremy?"

"Well, Judith, that was the point. I don't regret his trauma; he's cocky, and needs to learn that he's not the be-all and end-all of the universe. When he gave up his uncle, he gained some valuable wisdom."

"That he should never cross you?" Judith's voice was laden with sarcasm.

"That he needs to think about what he does before he does it."

Jeremy used several expletives not easily camouflaged in innuendo.

"That arrogant bastard," he growled. "He thinks that he taught me a 'well-needed life lesson'? I'll teach him a life lesson, the end of one, that is -- his."

"Jeremy did seem to be rather fond of his uncle," Adelaide remarked. "And his uncle was quite fond of him. I can only imagine he's not too happy that Ajax killed him, if he knows, and if

Ajax did. It makes me wonder why he put someone he cared so much about in danger, though.

"I don't think he took things all that seriously."

"I'd have to agree," said Joe. "I'm sorry, son, but you did seem to be a little cavalier about it, what with punching Johnson in the nose twice, and all."

"I'm glad everyone has an opinion," Jeremy snarled. "Adelaide would be dead if I hadn't sent her away. Has everyone forgotten about that?"

The fire crackled. "It was smart; I will admit that," said Albert. "Frustrating as all hell, though, for me. Would have saved a great deal of trouble if I had been able to simply get the guinea pig, find out what they all knew, and then vanished."

"They might have all kept on living that way."

"Gig is family," Adelaide stated with tremendous conviction. "I would no more sacrifice him than Rumsfeld, or my own father. Actually, I'd give up that last one first."

"Which brings us back to Peter. Do you hate him?"

"I don't hate him, I just don't respect him. He ran away."

Judith shook her head. "No, he was protecting you. He was doing what your grandfather wanted."

"Oh," Adelaide leaned forward, "speaking of which, do you know if Mick Hervey was really my grandfather?"

"When I realized Mick was Alistair, I freaked out," Peter said. "I mean, this was all his fault, and there he was, still pulling the strings, still pushing buttons like he'd always done."

"He was not your favourite person?"

Peter laughed maniacally. "That's a serious understatement. I hated him."

"And so, you confronted him."

"Yeah, I did. He brushed me off, but then I got drunk, and came back." He seemed almost proud of his accomplishment.

"You killed him."

"Well, a jury would call it 'involuntary manslaughter'. I didn't mean to kill him; we fought, and he fell, and hit his head. I just chose not to call an ambulance."

"Or tell the truth."

"Well, people convicted of involuntary manslaughter are sent to jail, with all of the bona fide murderers, and so on. I don't belong there."

Judith frowned. "You mean, at that point, you did not belong there."

"Ah, yes," Peter smiled, "things have progressed, somewhat; haven't they?"

"All I know is," Albert declared, "I didn't kill Madeline Greensborough. It wasn't me that she was after."

"That woman just wouldn't quit," said Peter. "She really loved that old bastard. It was sad. I explained it all to her, but she refused to see reason -- she said she'd call Joe, and tell him what I'd done."

"I couldn't let her do that."

"What crime is that associated with?"

"I believe they call that 'second-degree murder', that is, when you kill someone without intending to at the outset." He slouched, vaguely.

"She was nothing more than a nuisance," said Albert "Even Peter could have talked his way out of that one. Totally unnecessary."

Joe stared into the fire. "Whichever one of those two was responsible for killing Madeline, they're going to Hell for it. There wasn't a kinder woman."

"She made good cookies," said Jeremy.

"Jeremy," said Judith, "a woman is more than the sum of her cookies."

"She made good cookies," said Adelaide. "It's too bad Albert killed her."

"It is. Returning to the topic of your father, where do you think he is now?"

"Probably passed out on the floor," the young woman surmised. "He may not even know I'm gone."

Peter appeared to be offended. "You imagine that she thinks that little of me? No, I'm sure she knows I'm following her. I'd never let her down like that."

"He's always let me down like that," she continued. "After we came to Saskatchewan, he never seemed all that concerned for me."

"In all fairness," Judith said, "Adelaide, you were not the most endearing child."

Adelaide appeared to be offended. "I was a child. He was an adult. I was allowed to be petulant, and he was supposed to convince me to mature. Instead, he got me a dog, and then ignored me. No offence, Rumsfeld."

Rumsfeld wagged his tail, to signal his understanding.

"I did my best to get Adelaide to grow up," said Jeremy. "She was always so stubborn. It was her decision to keep away from me at school, you know. She pushed me away; I was just respecting her wishes."

"I didn't want to be part of that superficial crowd, and Jeremy wanted to be a hockey star," Adelaide clarified. "He wasn't going to fit in hanging around with me, and I didn't want to become a 'jock's girlfriend'."

"Strong and independent," agreed Joe. "That's Adelaide."

"Although, there were all of those nights in your bedroom with her, is that not correct, Jeremy?"

"You sly dog," Joe chuckled. "Having a sordid affair, and you're not even married."

Jeremy blushed. "It's not like that. We've never --"

Adelaide blushed. "It's not like that. We've never even kissed."

"I don't think they've ever even kissed," said Peter. "I love Jeremy like a son, and he hates me like one. I'd like nothing more than to see those two together. I just don't know if they'll see past their own issues enough to ever make it work."

"He really did his best not to tell me anything," Albert said. "I really had to 'take the thumbscrews' to Tanya before he talked -- I think he loves her a great deal. It's all very tragic."

"Judith," Adelaide interjected, "do you know if Mick Hervey was really my grandfather?"

"What are your thoughts, Adelaide? Think of me as merely a reflection of yourself."

"Isn't it I who is a reflection of your thoughts?"

"Humour me, Adelaide."

"All right," she conceded. "Taking into account what Jasper said, I'd have to conclude that he was, although that's admittedly not a great deal of evidence upon which to base such an important deduction."

"This is your belief, however?"

"Yes, it is. Judith, was Mick Hervey my grandfather?"

"If I told you the truth, I'd simply tell you to forget it again."

"I don't know what Adelaide would do if she knew the truth for certain," Peter said. "Somehow, I think she'd be happy to have had the time with him, but devastated that she lost him again."

"I'm not sure she would understand why he lied to her, either."

"Mick Hervey was Adelaide's grandfather?" Jeremy was stunned. "Logically, I'm sure she could empathize with his decision not to tell her. But, emotionally, I think she would be hurt a lot to know that he didn't trust her. Are you sure Mick was her grandfather?"

"Forget what I just said," Judith commanded.

"What were we talking about?" asked a bewildered Jeremy.

"I found a fully loaded pistol in Walter's pick-up truck," said Peter.

"Walter was the man you killed with the shovel?"

"Yeah. 'In for a penny, in for a pound' -- that is what you British people say, isn't it?"

"Australian, actually."

Peter rubbed his temple. "Oh, like Alistair. That figures."

"What does the justice system of your time think of what you did to Walter?"

Gazing into the fire, Peter spoke contemplatively. "That would be 'first-degree murder', since I intended to kill him if he didn't give me his keys before I even knocked on his door."

"So, that would make you a certified mur --"

"No, I won't accept that," Peter shouted, taking to his feet. "Murderers kill without purpose. I had a purpose. Walter was simply 'collateral damage'."

"All those I killed were merely 'collateral damage' in a war between sides much larger than you, or I," said Albert. "We are but pawns in a game of chess between kings'."

"I don't care what purpose anyone thinks they're serving," said Joe. "If you break the law, I'll take you to jail."

"Sometimes you need to take the law into your own hands," Jeremy declared.

"I just want to go home," cried Adelaide. Rumsfeld growled, and Gig wheeked.

"Thank you all for your time," said Judith.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN:

HOWARD.

THE DOOR EXPLODED.

Howard supposed he would just have to build a new one; after all, it was he who had set the charge that ultimately led to the door's destruction.

He only hoped that the demolition had proven productive.

Climbing out from behind his up-ended kitchen table, he stepped over the wooden fragments that now littered the floor of his mountain cabin, to assess the profitability of his venture. He expected to find one assassin, by the name of Albert Johnson, unconscious or, even better, dead, not far from the entryway, on the outside.

Unfortunately, his adversary was not there. Either he had escaped the blast, or was not significantly wounded -- regardless, the battle was not won, and would continue.

The tall, thin, aging Vietnam War veteran spat in annoyance, and then surveyed his surroundings for potential weaponry, and hastily improvised traps left by his opponent. There was plenty of the former and none of the latter; this Albert Johnson struck Howard as the type of soldier who would sneak up behind you, and slit your throat, not rig grenades.

Which of these was more cowardly was debatable.

He was too old for this. His back screamed at him in torment, and his hands and feet ached from years of constant abuse. In consequence, his temper was quick to rage, and it took great effort to contain his anger, and focus upon the subject at hand.

Apparently, this 'Mister Ajax' was not going to engage him, for the time being, and Howard stepped back inside. He had turned, to attend to his weaponry cabinet and obtain the services of his shotgun, when Albert punched him under the chin.

Decades of clenched teeth had strengthened the tendons surrounding Howard's jaw, and this attack had little effect. In fact, the veteran failed to move an inch, much to Albert's consternation. Momentarily, the assassin smiled, displaying his bright, white teeth, and vanished into the night, like a ghost.

Methodically, Howard resumed his course toward the gun cabinet, to obtain firearms and put an end to this nonsense. This was precisely why he had elected to hide himself away, high above in the mountains -- people.

Four glorious years had passed without Howard needing to interact with anyone. Once every season he would trek down to a predefined 'cache', hidden away, that Jasper, from Jasper, would re-stock every three months. He would pack his supplies onto a trailer, or a sled, if winter, and then haul them back up to his cabin. It was perfect.

Then, that girl came, with her dog, and her damned guinea pig, to urinate in the pool of his paradise. She had played upon his few remaining sympathies; in retrospect, he ought to have allowed her to freeze to death, instead of offering her shelter only to be told that some insane Iraq-war reject was on the way, to make his miserable life even more so.

Howard sighed a sigh that only those as tired as he can utter. He hated 'cat and mouse'; if he had enough explosives, he would simply turn the entire area into a gigantic, smoking crater, and be done with it. His retirement had been pleasant, but it was over now -- the angel of death had visited in the guise of a teenaged girl, and her minion had followed to do her bidding.

He could only hope to take that demon to Hell with him.

The weapons cabinet was locked -- for safety, of course. However, reaching into his pocket for the appropriate key, Howard abruptly realized that Albert had relieved him of that particular item, likely when the assassin had assaulted the older man's chin.

"Fiddlesticks," cursed Howard.

There was a contingency; there was always a contingency. Atop the cabinet were epoxy, a small blowtorch, and a lighter. Howard filled the lock with epoxy, and then lit the torch, to rapidly heat the glue dry, solid and impenetrable.

If he could not use his guns, then no one else would, either.

He would need to improvise a weapon. The cabin was littered with objects that might be effective, in one way or another; this was intentional -- war was ingrained into his spirit, and tinged every single thing that Howard did.

A large boat oar, which was curious since Howard had no boat, hung from the wall, and would be his 'weapon of choice'; wielding it, the grizzled old man headed for the permanently opened exit, shut off the light, and moved out, into the pitch-black night.

He did not need a torch; Howard had committed the terrain about his home to memory, and updated it every day, walking back and forth over the surrounding acres for an hour. It was his daily exercise, and a productive use of his time -- especially for when assassins came around to spoil his supper.

This was an advantage he cherished, and, when he crept upon the unsuspecting Albert, and hit him upon the head with the boat oar, celebrated. His adversary seemingly unconscious, Howard would revisit the cabin, to find some rope, and then return, only to discover that Albert had vanished once again.

He spat in exasperation.

"Why would you do such a foolish thing?" he had said, in all candour, to the girl, the one who called herself 'Adelaide'. "It's just a guinea pig, for Christ's sake. Just give it to the guy, and go home."

Her eyes had narrowed to slits, and told him that she had a strong emotional attachment to the irritating creature.

"Okay, fine," he continued, without permitting the girl a single word. "But, are you willing to die for that thing?"

"Yes," she said, unreservedly.

Howard had spat, then, but into his kitchen sink, for he would never soil his own floor. "You children these days --"

"Yeah, I know; I'm crazy. I've heard it all before."

"Well, then you've been given sage advice," Howard grumbled. She folded her arms, in the universal female expression of stubbornness, and he knew that his quiet retirement was over.

His reflection ended when Albert Johnson hit him in the knees with the boat oar, and he involuntarily sank to the snow-covered ground, no longer capable of remaining upright. Toppling over, the assassin then went to decapitate him, but Howard rolled out of the way, and kept rotating, into the darkness, escaping Albert's clutches for the time being.

The fact that the assassin had not simply struck Howard upon the head was telling -- this man was a sadist; he wanted his enemies to see their end coming. This could be used to Howard's advantage, eventually.

In the meantime, he would be forced to play Albert's game, skulking through the darkness, and making random attacks. There would come one critical moment, one crucial instant upon which Howard would have an opportunity to inflict a fatal injury upon his adversary, but a great deal of misery was to happen before that point could be reached.

They had a rousing fistfight, which Howard enjoyed immensely, and suspected Albert did, as well. "What is it about that girl?" the assassin gasped, rhetorically, between rounds. "Why is it everyone's willing to die for her?" He sounded genuinely perplexed.

"What about it, old man?" Albert asked Howard. "Why are you fighting me?"

Howard unleashed another blow, and then stepped back. "I suppose it's the old good-versus-evil story; she's good, and you're evil."

Albert punched back. "I don't agree. It's all very grey, and ambiguous. There is no 'good' or 'evil' any more, just self-interest and disinterest."

"That's a very cynical point of view," said Howard. "I don't recall fighting for cynicism."

"World War II? No, you're not that old. Vietnam?" Albert laughed. "That wasn't exactly a battle for nobility, either."

Howard kicked Albert in the shins. "We still had some principles. Unlike you guys, and your 'enemy combatants'. Disgraceful. You're why I became a monk."

"Monks don't fight back."

"It was a figurative term. Now, here's a literal kick to the head."

The blow was delivered, as promised, and Albert fell to the snow; Howard withdrew, to consider his options.

Albert Johnson was a reactive tactician. He would not fashion his own weapons; instead, he would wait for his opponent to bring them into the field of battle, and then take the armaments for his own.

This was an intelligent strategy.

Obviously, Albert would have a knife, but he would not employ it until the critical moment mentioned earlier, lest Howard gain control of the blade, and use it against him. This meant that, either Howard could attempt to beat Albert into submission, which was unlikely given the demonstrated stamina of the substantially younger man, or, he would need to acquire a weapon that would have a decisive result, and be difficult for the assassin to commandeer.

Typically, this would be a projectile weapon, but those were inaccessible.

Howard could run; he knew the surrounds of his cabin very well, and would certainly evade someone as inexperienced with mountaineering as Albert Johnson. However, Albert would likely then proceed upon his target -- this was not preferable; Adelaide's foolishness did not deserve death, merely a stern talking-to, which Howard had already delivered, succinctly.

"You need to grow the Hell up, little girl."

"I am not a 'little girl'."

Howard had spat in infuriation. "Well, you're sure behaving like one. Selfish."

"This is for the good of mankind," she had then said, unconvincingly.

"Altruism is often selfish." God, did Howard ever know that to be true.

"So what, then? I shouldn't do anything?"

"No, I didn't say that," Howard had said. "You shouldn't bother other people. They might not feel so altruistic."

Howard had a reasonable thought, and subsequently revisited the present. It would probably be best to ensure that Albert's advance would halt there, before embarking upon the task of killing him. If, and as Howard's bravado diminished, he realized this was most likely, Albert gained the upper hand, the assassin would, at the very least, be incapable of following Adelaide.

This could be accomplished by disposing of his climbing equipment.

It had to be near; Albert would not want to leave it too far away. An expert at hiding things, Howard was also quite proficient at finding them, and did not feel that much effort would be expended to locate that cache. He would, of course, have to cast off his own mountaineering gear, stranding himself.

That ought to happen first.

A return to the cabin, and a collection of the most vital equipment, transpired. A deep ravine existed several hundred metres to the south; he would travel there directly, senses keen to the presence of Albert Johnson. The assassin absent, he tossed his gear down into the chasm; perhaps, Albert would notice the equipment was missing, and decide that Howard had fled.

In any event, another altercation was required to deflect suspicion from his true intent, and Howard would go and find Albert Johnson, lurking in the forest.

He had the element of surprise, but approximating some sort of cat, Albert realized Howard's presence at the very last moment, sidestepping his opponent, and evading a nasty skull fracture, courtesy of a hefty boulder. They fought with fallen tree limbs, and rolled about in the snow and the dirt akin to a pair of rival schoolchildren.

Both men exhausted, there was then a pause.

"Where have you been, grandpa?" inquired Albert. "I noticed some of your stuff is missing. Are you planning to make your escape?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," retorted Howard. "I have my plans; I'm sure you have yours."

"Not really; I just make it up as I go along." He grinned.

Howard spat. "Typical."

Snidely: "What's that supposed to mean, old man?"

"Well, no one takes any pride in anything, anymore."

"God," Howard thought to himself, "I sound like my grandfather."

Albert laughed. "You want me to take pride in bashing your skull in?"

"Of course I do; I'm a soldier. If you didn't, that would be pretty disrespectful."

The assassin furrowed his brow. "I've never thought about it that way."

"Now you have." Howard sprang to his feet, and ran off, back toward the cabin, Albert close behind.

His adversary's gear was certain to be in the trees, so Howard would need to lead Albert away, distract him somehow, and then double back to hunt for the equipment.

In this scenario, 'distraction' generally meant hitting Albert with something.

His supper, a cast-iron pot full of baked beans, his favourite meal if served with bourbon, an alcoholic spirit, remained on the top of his pot-bellied stove. Dashing into the cabin, he took hold of it, burning his hands in the process, and threw the remaining contents at Albert before tossing the pot at the assassin's head.

It connected, and, his enemy dazed, Howard fled the cabin, following a haphazard route in the dark, ending in the forest.

"What if you get to where you're going," Howard had said, to Adelaide, "and there's nothing there?"

The girl frowned, then. "I don't know. I haven't thought about it."

"Well, you should," her elder had subsequently advised. "You always need to have a contingency. That word ought to be tattooed on the back of everyone's right hand. Contingency, contingency, contingency."

Howard had no contingency.

He hunted for Albert's cache, running from tree to tree with an increasing sense of desperation. His adversary would quickly surmise Howard's intentions, and hurry to defend his valuable equipment; the game would soon be over.

Thankfully, Albert's backpack would be revealed, and Howard would take it, with the greatest of haste, to the ravine, but before he could cast the equipment down, Albert stabbed him through the chest, with a spear improvised from his own broom, and chopping knife.

"I'll take that," Albert said, relieving Howard of the gear. The older man then collapsed to the ground, wheezing.

Albert tossed a bottle of bourbon down beside Howard. "Here, old man. It will numb the pain, but it will also make you bleed out faster. Your choice." The assassin began to walk away.

"Don't you want to know where she went?" Howard rasped after him.

The victor stopped his pace, and turned. "No; I'll figure it out."

"Then what was all this for?"

Albert shrugged his shoulders. "I like a good fight, and I knew this one would be epic."

Howard laughed, the best that he could with his mortal injury.

"Thanks, Howard," Adelaide had said, upon her departure earlier in the day. "You're a lifesaver"

"If you say so."

INTERLUDE FOUR:

A FRIENDLY FACE.

“BERNARD IS A FOOL.”

Missus Matthews placed her crystal tablet upon her lap, and then reached for her cup of tea. “He just wants to keep it all ‘scientific’; dry, analytical -- and boring.

“Well, I say, outside of dull ‘scholars’ like himself, who, exactly, is going to want to read that?”

Judith nodded, and smiled, happy for the note of support.

“Don’t you worry,” Missus Matthews continued, “I’ll talk to the other members of the board. I’m sure that I can convince the majority to approve your work -- Bernard will simply have to go sit in the corner, and sulk, like he always does.”

“Thank you so much --”

“Oh, don’t worry yourself about it, my dear. We need more like you in this farce of an establishment. Stuffy old know-it-all’s thinking that they’re the last bastions of human civilization. Indeed!

“At any rate, my dear, I have something to tell you. I overheard Bernard and one of his subordinates discussing this a day or two ago, and I thought that, since you’ve so roundly ‘told him off’, he would not be all that likely to share his discovery with you.

“It seems that his researcher did some tests in order to determine the age of the guinea pig skeleton that was found in the grave with Albert Johnson. The cavy was so old, at the time of his death, that it is a certainty he met his end due to natural causes.

“In any event, he was much older than Gig was at the conclusion of the affair you are presently documenting.

“So, the question then, is: if that guinea pig is Gig, how did he wind up there?”

Missus Matthews sipped her tea.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT:

RETRIBUTION.

COUGAR WAS HUNTING.

Cast out from his home, he was a pariah, shunned by the creatures of the forest. Although the humans had resoundingly declared themselves to be their enemies, the other animals were unwilling to face the revised reality of things, content to burrow into the thick mud of their false beliefs.

Instead, they had decided that Cougar, for sensibly seeing things as they truly were, was a liability, and could potentially encourage further death and destruction on the part of the humans. Of course, this was absurd; it should have been obvious to all of them that the humans had forsaken whatever few scruples that they had remaining, and were thus capable of anything.

This was no longer an issue of minor transgressions breaking the peace; this was all-out war.

Worried that Cougar would fight on his own accord, the creatures had forced him away from human settlement, up into the alpine -- his own personal gulag. There was little in the way of large game up there; he would need to content himself with small rodents, rabbits and birds.

He spent his days prowling about, searching for something upon which to vent his frustrations, but little could be found; an elderly human lived in a wooden structure nearby, but he had a rifle, and Cougar had witnessed the capabilities of that weapon first hand.

No, Cougar's seething hatred had not yet reached the point where he would be given to complete abandon -- he not only wanted revenge, but also sought to survive that effort intact. So, day after day, he patrolled the forest, praying that the Spirits would give him the opportunity to take retribution for all those who had lost their homes, or died, merely so that humanity could expand its

territory further, as if it did not occupy enough of the world, already.

It was nauseating.

A warm Chinook wind had temporarily cast off the chill of early winter, and some smaller alpine creatures were using the opportunity to restock their supplies. Cougar chased an unfortunate squirrel, more of a recreational activity than a nutritional one, through the trees in enjoyment of the warm reprieve; it scaled a tree, and the feline moved on.

He smelled a human.

Slowly, silently, like big flakes of wet snow falling when the wind is still, Cougar crept towards the smell, soon approaching a path carved through the forest upon which humans once tread, long ago.

One was travelling upon it again.

This was a younger human, a female. The hatred in Cougar's heart, blackened like his previous woodland home, rapidly grew; cries for revenge, from those who had been lost, tore at his soul. The time had arrived -- retribution was at hand.

Cougar need only contend with one impediment -- a dog.

At least, Cougar thought it was a dog; they came in so many varied shapes and sizes, it was difficult to discern all those who belonged to that particular species. The creature was similar in stature to Cougar, although not as lean, or muscular. It did not seem as if such an adversary would pose much of a threat.

On the other hand, there would be no harm in watching it for a while.

The human, and the dog, travelled the path through the forest under the watchful gaze of Cougar. The cat could smell a third animal, but was unable to see it; it had the scent of a rabbit, but not precisely. It did not matter. The creature was so small that it could not pose any threat to the mighty Cougar.

He paid careful attention to the dog's movements, its habits and behaviour; this study would be of great benefit later, when Cougar would confront it. The advantage would be quite decisive,

and victory swift. Then, he could kill the human, and realize his grim aspiration.

Cougar would be a murderer.

Hunting not for defence, and not for food, was completely contrary to his instincts. Only humans killed for other reasons than those -- not animals.

The feline would make himself part of a very rare, but extremely dangerous breed. His rage had, ironically, changed him into exactly that which he loathed so very much, a creature willing to disadvantage, or even take the life of another merely to advance non-instinctual interests -- or gain emotional satisfaction.

Unaware that their executioner was present, Cougar's prey proceeded farther into the woods.

There was a small clearing ahead; the battle would be waged there. The feline could circle about his victims, and launch assaults at his leisure; disoriented, they would be unable to flee.

He ran, quietly as he could, to the clearing, hiding himself away until the human and the dog had reached the centre of it; then, Cougar revealed himself, growling and snarling, slowly pacing around his prey, trapping them.

The dog barked.

This was no ordinary bark; this was a bark of conviction, a declaration of nobility. Cougar was given cause to briefly reconsider -- the crusade upon which he was to promptly embark might be of much greater difficulty than previously thought.

Was he willing to risk his life on this enterprise?

Rationally, it seemed counterproductive to take such a chance -- if he were to fail, and meet his end without exacting penance from humanity, his life would have amounted to naught. This notion was unpalatable.

However, rational thought had very little to do with the current situation. The humans had taken away his home, his friends -- his life. This was no longer about 'the greater good'; it was simply about Cougar, and his yearning for revenge.

The dog barked again. The feline did not understand a great deal of Dog, but what he could make out translated roughly to 'I've given the business to a great deal larger than you, so you had better mind your manners, and permit us on our way.'

This slave of the humans certainly projected a great deal of bravado. What, exactly, had the creature dispatched that was greater than Cougar? Had this dog fought Bear? That seemed rather unlikely. Cougar growled and snarled in response, detailing his complaint, although the dog was not liable to comprehend his eloquent speech.

It was only proper to outline the charges against the condemned before one executed them.

Surprisingly, the dog raised a rebuttal; they had nothing to do with Cougar's troubles, it insisted; they were from a far-away land, and were only passing through.

Cougar was not swayed. The human would answer for the crimes of its species, he decreed. It mattered little from whence the foul demon had came, it was within his domain, and would pay the penalty he had assigned.

The dog, of course, disagreed wholeheartedly, but Cougar was not interested in engaging in debate with the creature -- it had been brainwashed, coerced by humanity into believing that the demons had purpose, and the feline told the canine such, just prior to launching his opening charge.

Something happened, then, that surprised Cougar a great deal; the human stepped into his way.

He broke off his charge, and went back to circling. This was a very strange creature -- this human -- and further study was required before he could mount a competent offensive strategy. Initially, Cougar had only expected to fight a battle on a single front, but the risk had emerged that the human might engage the feline whilst the fight with the dog was still ongoing, and this could only prove detrimental to him.

The human shouted at him, unintelligible gibberish. Continuing to plead their case, the dog insisted that they were righteous, and beyond Cougar's reproach. They were presently fighting a campaign against the evil elements in humanity, and

Cougar was doing the world a grave disservice by interfering with that bold struggle.

Cougar was not interested in the dog's lies. All of humanity was evil, the feline declared; nothing could persuade him that this human was any different -- not even the bizarre self-sacrifice it exhibited in defence of a mere slave.

Perhaps, he considered, this human was simply defective. However, that would only make it all the more dangerous.

Unconventional methods would be required to resolve an exceptional situation. Cougar considered that it may just be the human who ought to be his primary focus; the loathsome creature had minimal defences of its own, and the dog would not inflict severe damage upon him before he had dispatched the demon back to the Hell from which it had spawned.

Hopefully, the dog would realize the courtesy Cougar was performing for it, and then withdraw. After all, no self-respecting animal would willingly enslave itself to pure evil, and this dog appeared principled.

The odds, Cougar calculated, were in the feline's favour.

He pounced on the human, sidestepping the canine and throwing the demon to the ground. However, before Cougar could inflict a mortal blow against the object of his disgust, it emitted a piercing, high-pitched squeal, and his sensitive hearing filled his mind with agony.

The dog bit him on the hindquarter, and Cougar retreated, back to the perimeter of the clearing, to circle once again whilst reconsidering the updated circumstances.

He growled and snarled his intent to kill them all, during which time he furiously thought about how he planned to do so. The intolerable noise must have come from the third creature he smelled, the rabbit-like animal that he suspected hid beneath the human's thick layers of strange fur. It was a powerful weapon, rendering him defenceless, unable to complete his attack, and vulnerable to whims of the dog.

Minutes, and then hours passed. The sun rose higher, and then sank lower in the sky; dusk began to invade the land.

Sadly, Cougar's rage did not abate. As the remaining daylight grew ever more precious, the scales were slowly tipping away from rational construction, and toward disorganized chaos. If he engaged the dog, the human would move against him; if he attacked the human, the dog was certain to strike.

If no solution could be found for this perplexing issue, and the risk to his own life could not be mitigated, he would soon be forced to act without regard -- he knew that he would not be granted an opportunity such as this again.

"If you do not release it, your rage will eventually consume you," Eagle had said, in the days before casting Cougar out. "It is like a vine, strangling the tree of your morality until it succumbs.

"Then, rage will control you unreservedly, and inevitably, you will die, too."

"Ridiculous," Cougar retorted. "I am Cougar, not Bear; mere emotion cannot rule me. Logic will always reign supreme. Your notions are foolish."

"Are you insinuating that I'm illogical?" growled Bear, incensed.

"I'm suggesting that we each have our strengths; mine is logic, and yours is not."

"What, then," Bear glowered, "do you imagine my strength to be?"

"Enough," Eagle cried. "Heed my words, Cougar. Rage will beguile you, and it is not interested in your survival, only its own, very selfish gratification."

"Not me," Cougar insisted. "I will never lose control."

Cougar lost control.

Unable to contain his rage toward it any longer, he leapt at the human. The tiny creature hidden within it unleashed its own shrieking fury, prompting Cougar to recoil.

Realizing the opening, the dog engaged him, and they both fell to the ground, wrestling with teeth and claws, neither able to land any decisive blows. The human howled, and the mysterious creature wailed, composing a soundtrack of destruction.

The noise no longer troubled him, for he was fighting no longer. Rage had gained the upper hand, and was subsequently directing his movements -- this was not about finesse, but random aggression. All Cougar could do was lay down, inside of his own mind, and watch the proceedings unfold.

"I warned you this would happen," gloated the representation of Eagle within Cougar's consciousness.

"Never lose control', huh?" said Bear.

"Oh, quiet, both of you," growled Cougar. "This isn't my doing; it was the humans who drove me to this, after all."

"I didn't go hunting humans," Bear observed. "What about you, Eagle?"

"No. You see, Cougar, we are better than they are; this is why they can never win -- unless, of course, you descend to their level."

The human kicked Cougar, then, or, at least, the rage-filled beast he had become. He turned on it, biting one of its hind paws, but was unable to break through the tough skin that protected it. The dog jumped on top of him, and attempted to rip open his neck; however, Cougar's muscles there were strong, and the dog did not succeed.

"Why is that dog so loyal?" Cougar wondered to his visions of Eagle and Bear. "Is the human not cruel to it, as the demon is to all other creatures?"

Dragging Cougar by the scruff of his neck, the dog pulled the feline away from the vicinity of the human, while continuing to petition for a cessation in hostilities. Were Cougar able to do so, he might have agreed at that point, but he was not, and could not.

Instead, the enraged feline responded by rolling on his back, and lashing out at the canine's exposed underbelly, capitalizing on his adversary's mistake, and gaining the advantage. Were this dog to behave typically, it would realize its folly, and then be consumed by the spectre of its own demise, no longer maintaining the zeal required to fight onward.

This was not a typical dog.

Despite the gravity of its wound, it would fight on. Cougar was impressed, but his rage was only frustrated, and grew exponentially in response, degrading his own effectiveness. That would be the only damage of consequence the feline would inflict in that battle; the dog would continue to methodically hammer away at his defences until he collapsed, defeated and dying.

His mission a success, the dog would join him, surrendering to its own mortal injuries, and the human would demonstrate her sorrow quite effectively, not only for the canine, but for Cougar, sitting on the ground between them, and comforting them both while they quietly passed on into the next life, together.

“With strong selfishness comes equally robust compassion,” noted Eagle, inside Cougar’s waning consciousness, just before he died. “That is the nature of humanity.”

Cougar could only nod, for he understood, then, how humanity was not only a curse, but also, at times, a blessing. He mourned for the dog he had killed, and begged forgiveness from the Spirits for his wrongdoing while the human gently stroked his forehead, and ushered him into the next life.

She was no demon; she was an angel.

INTERLUDE FIVE:

MOURNING.

“WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS, BERNARD?”

“To what do you refer, Madam?”

“This!” Judith growled, directing the man’s attention to the offending letter she presently clenched in her hand. “You’ve reduced my allowance.”

“And rightly so, Madam.”

Judith glared at him angrily, and then stormed into his house; Bernard followed her inside.

“Look, Madam,” he continued. “You cannot expect a full allowance if you are not making any contribution. It has been three months since the Committee has seen any of your work.”

“I have been ruminating.”

“Well, be that as it may, you must demonstrate these ruminations in order to be remunerated. That is the way of things.”

“I hate you, Bernard.”

“That feeling is mutual, Madam. Now, if you wish to be better compensated, I suggest that you translate these ‘ruminations’ of yours into something a bit more tangible.”

“I thought you did not approve?”

“I do not. However, Missus Matthews appears to have a differing opinion, and we have an alliance, of sorts, that must be maintained -- to her satisfaction.

“Regardless, we will not reward you if you do not accomplish anything.”

“So, you will publish my work, then?”

He did not answer her. "Good day, Madam," he said, curtly, whilst showing Judith to the door.

"Good day, sir."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE:

JOURNEY'S END.

ADELAIDE PEMBERTON WAS CRYING PROFUSELY.

She comforted her poor dog, Rumsfeld, the best that she could; there was nothing else the helpless Adelaide could do.

"Thank you, Rumsfeld," she whispered, stroking him gently. "I love you. You're not alone. Don't be afraid."

Then, her loyal companion died.

As far as she was concerned, it was over, then -- all of it.

Adelaide wrote in her journal: "I no longer cared about anything. The enraged cougar had appeared as if from nowhere, and taken away my most precious friend. I only wished for the cold Arctic air to freeze me to death, and whisk my soul away so that I might be with Rumsfeld, and at peace.

"A journey that had been foolishly mistaken as a 'grand adventure' had turned into a terrible tragedy. Others had died, I knew, but I myself had made no personal sacrifice, had suffered no loss. Until then.

"Then, it became all too real."

The defeated Adelaide Pemberton had curled up on the ground, in the foetal position, and prayed for the snows to come and cover her, and grow into a glacier, burying her for eternity.

It grew dark.

"That's not the Adelaide I know," said the voice of Mick Hervey, from the darkness.

"Go away," Adelaide grunted. "Just leave me alone."

The voice grew closer. "That's not really what you want, is it?"

"How should you know what I want? You're dead."

He stood over her. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"You're a figment of my imagination, generated by grief, or some sort of mental breakdown. You're not real. You're dead."

"Well, fine," Mick conceded. "I'm dead. But, you're not."

"Maybe I want to be."

"What about Gig?"

The guinea pig, having been momentarily forgotten by his guardian, wheeked softly from within the layers of Adelaide's clothing. "Oh, yeah. Gig."

"Look, Mick," she continued, "or Alistair, Grandpa; whoever you are -- I don't even know if I want to take Gig any further, anyway. Who knows what sort of nasty stuff might happen to him."

"Maybe he'd be better off freezing to death with me."

Mick thought for a moment. "You could be right. Maybe they'll dissect him with a rusty pocket knife, and then pickle his brain in malt vinegar."

"For a ghost, you're a really funny guy."

"Do you honestly think that I'd have gone through all that trouble to keep Gig alive, just so he could die as some trivial curiosity, to be subsequently discarded?"

Adelaide contemplated his words. "No, but the fact is, you're probably only my interpretation of you, arguing with me from inside my own head. But that image is false, too, isn't it? Mick Hervey, I mean?"

"No," Mick sighed. "Alistair Dennison was the fabrication, not Mick Hervey. Alistair was who I wanted to be, not who I truly was. The jovial, happy man you knew in Suffield was your real grandfather, not the grumpy old sourpuss in Vancouver."

"It's really comforting to hear myself say that."

"If you want to put it that way. You're only saying it because you know it to be the truth."

Try as she might, Adelaide could not discount Ghost Mick's argument.

"So," she sighed, resigned, "what do you want from me?"

"Build a fire."

She clambered to her feet, her legs weak, and her tailbone screaming in agony as if she had only just bruised it the day before. She groaned.

"That's what you get for laying on frozen ground," Mick chuckled. "I bet you won't do that again."

"Thanks a lot for that wonderful explanation, Grandpa."

"Life hurts; get a helmet'."

Electing to ignore Mick's ridicule, Adelaide slowly regained her mobility, lit her electric torch, and, obeying her grandfather's order, scoured the clearing for brush, and sticks.

She built a small pile of these, and struck a match, setting the pile alight.

Mick Hervey applauded, politely.

Short forays into the surrounding woods yielded larger, fallen branches, and an old stump, ejected from the ground, that Adelaide could use as a stoop.

Soon, the fire grew to be quite large.

Despite Mick's urging, she could not bring herself to dispose of the warriors' carcasses in the flames. Rumsfeld and the Cougar had both fought with distinct conviction -- Adelaide felt inadequate to be making such decisions regarding their ultimate fates.

So, they remained, there, on the ground, beside the fire, and Adelaide peered through the flames at them from the other side, as if they were surreal, figments of her imagination, like Mick Hervey.

"Will you carry on?" he asked her, well into the night, while a sea of stars twinkled high above.

"I don't know," his granddaughter responded. "I'm not sure." Gig chortled away inside Adelaide's jacket, the way that guinea pigs tend to do.

Mick crouched down, beside her, and looked her in the eyes. "It's important that you do."

"Yeah, yeah; I know -- the fate of humanity, blah, blah, blah. I'm not too happy about being put in this position, you know, Mick."

"Adelaide, it was never my intention for you to be forced into this predicament. If I was not dead, I would have made the journey myself."

She smiled, weakly. "If you were so convinced of that, you wouldn't have gone through all of that rigmarole to ensure that I did."

He stood up. "Always have a fallback," Mick declared to the night. "Even if you think your first plan is a sure thing." He turned toward her. "You know that. You're a smart girl."

"Young woman', thank you very much."

Mick smiled. "All right; you're a smart young woman. So, are you smart enough to see the necessity of seeing this through?"

She did not answer, but instead gazed into the fire, searching within its hues of orange and red for guidance, and did so well through the night, whilst Mick awaited her decision.

Meanwhile, a certain 'wolf' looked on from within the trees, sorrowfully grasping earlier events, and made his own decision, to leave the grieving young woman in peace, for the time being; he would carry on, and meet Adelaide Pemberton and her guinea pig, Gig, later, at their final destination.

"Adelaide!" shouted Jeremy, emerging from the forest in the light of early dawn, and entering the clearing, with his father close behind.

She looked up; Mick Hervey was gone.

"Adelaide!" Jeremy repeated, before noticing the fallen Rumsfeld. The young man knelt down beside his lifeless childhood comrade, and shed several tears. "What happened?" he demanded angrily.

"I think that's self explanatory," Adelaide said, brusquely, nodding towards the cold carcass of the once-vengeful Cougar.

“Cheezus-bloody-McCrisp,” Joe might have muttered, quietly, shaking his head sadly.

They went silent then, for several minutes, while Jeremy came to terms with his loss. Then, many grim notes were compared.

“Tanya’s in hospital?”

Jeremy nodded.

“And Angus and Martha are dead?” Adelaide was stunned.

“Bill and Jimmy too,” Jeremy added.

“And some man near a cabin a few kilometres back,” Joe concluded.

The young woman was genuinely aghast. “Where’s my Dad?”

“I don’t know,” said Joe. “He wouldn’t answer his phone when we tried to call him, and ours have both since gone dead.”

“The batteries expired before you started out from Jasper, I hope?”

“Don’t worry,” Jeremy assured her, “we left them there. No one can follow us that way.”

She sighed. “You managed to track me down, though.”

“It wasn’t easy.”

“So, now what?” Joe enquired, interjecting, somewhat impatient.

“You know, Mick Hervey wanted to know the exact same thing.”

“What?” Joe and Jeremy simultaneously gasped, in a confused chorus.

“Never mind,” Adelaide frowned.

“The real question,” mused Jeremy, “is: if he’s not here, where, in the world, is Albert-bloody-Johnson?”

There was smoke rising from the chimney of the decrepit old cabin; Albert took notice of this, and spent quite some time assessing the finer points of the situation. He had three choices: he could ignore the presence inside of the cabin, and apprehend Adelaide Pemberton before she could arrive there.

However, this would leave a potentially lethal 'loose end' in the form of the person, or persons, inside the cabin, who obviously had some knowledge of the guinea pig, the experiment -- or both.

This was unacceptable.

Otherwise, Albert could wait, permit Adelaide to arrive, enter the cabin, reveal who precisely lurked within, and then surprise all of them at his leisure. Although he had no pistol, the assassin was confident he could subdue all of the occupants with his knife, but he found the idea of killing Adelaide distasteful, and that option was not preferred.

His third choice was to deal with the contents of the cabin directly, and then wait for Adelaide, and relieve her of the guinea pig. This was the riskiest alternative, for he had no clear picture of just exactly what awaited him within those decaying walls. It could be a trap; his unknown nemesis may have gambled upon his choice, and rigged the structure to explode, killing him in the process.

Albert paced back and forth, like Cougar, just inside the trees, unable to reconcile his conflict. Eventually, he decided to take option number three.

Peter Pemberton, meanwhile, left Howard's shack. Elmore had taken him to Jasper, in Jasper, and that man, having seen through Adelaide's ruse, had pointed Peter in the right direction, after some measure of bewilderment and consternation had been expressed regarding the entire situation.

Elmore was to remain with Jasper whilst Peter took pursuit after Adelaide, Albert Johnson, Joe and Jeremy. Joe would not kill Albert; he was too principled to shoot a man in cold blood.

Peter was not.

He hurried, for he feared that the affair had already concluded, and that he might be too late.

On the other hand, Adelaide was procrastinating; the sun rose, and made a steady march higher into the sky while Joe and Jeremy attempted to persuade her to bequeath Rumsfeld and Cougar to the flames, and continue on. Finally, Jeremy did the deed arbitrarily.

Adelaide did not protest.

Whoever resided within the cabin sat in the shadows, and Albert was unable to catch a glimpse of them through the tiny, cracked glass that served as a rudimentary window. He crept to the door, as silently as possible, and then burst through it, blazing sunshine inside.

“Hello, Albert,” said the woman, pistol raised toward him. “Please, close the door, and sit down.”

There was smoke rising from the chimney of the decrepit old cabin; Adelaide took notice of this, and spent quite some time assessing the finer points of the situation.

“You have me at a disadvantage,” said Albert, closing the door, and taking a seat. “You seem to know who I am, but I don’t know you.”

“We do, ‘Andrew Jackson’; we have just never met in person.”

“You are well informed.” He spent a moment deep in thought. “The nebulous ‘J’, I presume.”

“Indeed,” said Julia. “Albert, I would like to propose a solution to our mutual problem.”

“Other than my killing you all?” He smirked.

“Amusing,” she retorted, waving the pistol, “but, at the moment, I don’t think you have the upper hand.”

“That can change, J,” he said, gravely. “Quickly. Very quickly.”

“I’m sure it can,” Julia shrugged. “However, I’m not here to exchange threats; I’m here to broker a compromise.” She leaned forward. “Are you willing to entertain my suggestions?”

Albert rubbed his chin in contemplation. “I’m listening.”

Neither Adelaide, nor Joe, nor Jeremy could provide any reasonable insight into who might be within the cabin; Albert Johnson was unlikely to attract attention to himself by burning a fire, so his sole presence there was consequently ruled out.

"I'm going to go knock on the door," Jeremy declared, facetiously. Adelaide punched him in the shoulder. "Ouch!" he complained.

"Don't be stupid," she said.

"Do you have a better idea?" Debate ensued.

During this time, Albert and Julia continued to negotiate.

"I need the guinea pig," he stated, flatly.

"Adelaide won't be fond of that, I imagine."

"It's not negotiable. If I don't present that creature to my employers, they will kill me, and then send someone else to come after you all again. They definitely won't take my word for it.

"Hell," he laughed, "I wouldn't take my word for it."

Julia nodded. "I need samples from him, and I'd want to introduce him to a friend, for a little while," she said, directing Albert's attention to a cage, sitting upon the floor, beside her. A guinea pig muttered within.

He shrugged. "That's fine," he agreed. "I can probably make up a case for the rest of it, and make it all go away. As long as I have Gig -- the guinea pig, of course."

They then sat in silence for a few moments, while the pot-bellied stove crackled away, a roaring fire raging within.

"Alistair is dead, then?" Julia said, quietly.

"Yes," Albert confirmed, "he is."

"He was my father; do you know that?" asked Julia.

"No. My condolences."

There was a long pause. "Did you kill him?"

"No," Albert frowned. "Some mad-dog lunatic named Peter Pemberton seemed to have some kind of serious disagreement with him. I'm convinced he did it. Do you know that man, Peter?"

"He's my husband."

"Adelaide's your daughter?" Albert's eyebrows rose.

"And Alistair's granddaughter," Julia added.

"Wow," the assassin said, bemused. "I guess it all makes sense, now."

A pocket of sap exploded inside the stove. "So, do we have a deal? No more killing?"

"Well," Albert replied, hesitantly, "except for Peter, yes."

Julia held up the pistol. "I'll deal with Peter myself."

"Are you sure? I'm much better at this; trust me."

"I'm sure."

Meanwhile, the great debate raged within the trees, the three participants arguing back and forth regarding the best way to proceed. Each had his, or her, own distinct point of view.

One proposal would have them wait for someone to emerge from the cabin, thus identifying the mysterious third-party, and permitting them to act accordingly. The second called upon close scrutiny, with a danger of discovery, to uncover those within.

The third would have them, as Jeremy had earlier humorously suggested, simply knock upon the door.

Exasperated with the endless deliberation, Adelaide Pemberton would ultimately take it upon herself to do precisely that, marching up to the front door of the cabin, and pounding it resoundingly with her fist.

Promptly, a woman answered.

"Hello, Adelaide," she said. "Do you recognize me?"

Adelaide thought for a moment, and then her eyes grew wide.

“Mom?”

CHAPTER THIRTY:

A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL.

“YES, ADELAIDE,” JULIA SAID.

“Hi Adelaide,” Albert said, cheerily, poking his head over Julia’s shoulder. Adelaide instinctively recoiled in fear and loathing.

“Mom, that man’s dangerous!” she growled, taking a few steps backward, reaching for the knife that Jimmy had given her, presently buried deep within her pocket.

“You’re under arrest,” said Joe, still walking toward the cabin with Jeremy, whilst working to remove his pistol from its holster.

Julia held up her own weapon, and pointed it in Joe’s general direction. “Hold on, there, cowboy,” she said. “Nobody’s arresting anyone -- um -- what’s your name?”

“I’m Constable Joe Henderson,” the policeman said, reaching Adelaide’s side, “and this is my son, Jeremy.”

Julia smiled. “Jeremy looks like a nice boy, Adelaide. I’m proud of you.”

Adelaide blushed. “It’s not like that --”

“Of course it isn’t,” Julia laughed. “Anyway,” she continued, “shall we all retire indoors? It’s pretty cold out here!”

Retreating inside, they gathered around the woodstove, and sat.

“Is there anybody else, Adelaide?” Julia inquired, in reference to her daughter’s entourage.

“Not still living,” retorted Jeremy, with a subdued, but obvious anger.

"Mom, if you don't mind," Adelaide interjected, disregarding her mother's own question, "just where the Hell have you been, exactly?"

Julia sighed. "Well, Adelaide," she said, furrowing her brow, "it had always been my plan to finish up with the project I had been working on, and then rejoin you and your father in Suffield, once things had settled down.

"Unfortunately, Albert here screwed that up. Royally."

The assassin merely shrugged. "It's my job; what can I do?" he asked rhetorically, holding out his hands, palms upward.

Julia glared at him briefly with no small measure of disdain, and then continued with her explanation. "Obviously, I couldn't risk exposing you to that level of danger, so I went into hiding. I fully expected Albert to turn up sooner or later -- unfortunately, it was much later than I had anticipated."

"Hey," objected Albert to Julia's furtive criticism, "your father was a crafty guy. It took a while, but I got there, eventually."

Jeremy huffed. "How can you two sit there," the young man spat distastefully, "and talk so casually when so many people have died over this -- what is this, exactly?"

Albert flashed Jeremy one of his white-toothed grins. "You want me to slit everyone's throats instead? I can easily manage that, if you like. You first."

"Down, boy," admonished Julia. "You too, you cute little puppy-dog, you. He is cute, Adelaide -- you can't deny that simple truth --"

"Mom!"

"Anyway," she giggled, "Adelaide; so, you need to understand my position. I couldn't risk making contact with either you, or your father -- I only communicated with your grandfather, through his silly base-26 code, which you obviously deciphered yourself, eventually, or you wouldn't be here."

Adelaide nodded, but did not indicate that she had become any less perturbed.

"When he died, that occasion triggered a series of pre-arranged events that led to our meeting here today. We had hoped that either Albert would be eluded, which he was apparently not, or that he would be partial to making an arrangement, which, fortunately, he is."

A few moments of silence followed before Adelaide finally, and tentatively, asked the following, most-critical of questions: "What kind of 'deal'?"

"Why don't we just kill him?" Jeremy cut in, before Julia could respond. "We have two guns, and he has his stupid grin. Problem solved."

Julia shook her head, but Albert moved to explain the fundamental problems with Jeremy's straightforward rationale. "Jeremy, it usually takes several bullets to kill someone, unless you get a lucky shot, which is pretty unlikely. Meanwhile, the individual you're shooting at is liable -- or guaranteed, in my case, I assure you -- to quickly move to assault you, violently, with another weapon, perhaps a knife."

He not-so-subtly indicated the blade hanging at his waist.

"So," Albert concluded, "even if you successfully subdue that hostile element with bullets, he'll probably have taken most, if not all of you with him."

"And even if you did escape unscathed," Julia added, "that particular individual's employers would merely send someone else to finish the matter that he was incapable of completing himself."

"What matter is that?"

Julia frowned. "The guinea pig. Haven't you figured that out, yet? He's a pretty boy, Adelaide, but maybe not that smart."

"No, I'm not stupid," snapped Jeremy. "I just wanted to hear someone who is 'supposedly' sane say it. Although, I still don't understand why it matters so much."

"Look around you, Jeremy. Not at this room, I mean, but the world. There's a storm coming, a big one, that's going to tear everything apart -- we're just not 'culturally sustainable', for a lack of a better term."

"But, guinea pigs eating garbage? That just doesn't seem like it could be that significant, in the grand scheme and all."

"There's a great deal of garbage out there, Jeremy. In less than a century, we've generated thousands upon thousands of tonnes of plastic waste. The bio-mechanism inside the guinea pig permits a completely efficient recycling of that rubbish, and when the petroleum supply suddenly stops -- which it will, and soon -- every joule of energy generated by that process will be greatly appreciated."

"What about solar power? Wind power?"

"Petroleum recovery won't be the only method of generating heat, or producing electricity, no. But, you can do a great many things with that petroleum jelly besides burning it."

"So, then, if this is all so great, and wonderful, and everything, why has someone hired Albert Johnson to kill us all, then?"

"I'll answer that one," said Albert. "My employers, the 'Smiths', own a great deal of stock in oil companies, and they're afraid that this will 'cut in to their business'. It seems silly, since the quantities we're talking about are negligible in the current economy, but these people are very reactionary, and fear some sort of progression that will escalate into a more substantial threat."

"Of course, this is truly only practical in the apocalyptic context that Julia mentions, so their fears are unfounded. Still, you can't convince them of that. I tried."

"Apocalyptic?" Joe enquired, seeking clarification.

Jeremy scoffed. "Like, the world's going to Hell, Dad."

"Oh. Well, thanks for telling me."

"You're welcome."

Adelaide had run out of patience. "What deal?" she reiterated vehemently.

"Can I see the guinea pig?" Julia asked her. "Please?"

"No. Not until you explain to me exactly what's going to happen to him."

Albert leaned back in his chair. "I told you this wasn't going to be easy."

"Shush, Albert. Adelaide, Gig is very important, and I'm sure you've grown quite fond of him, but he has a greater purpose. I'm going to take some blood samples from him, and then introduce him to a new friend." Julia pointed towards the cage resident upon the floor, to this point ignored.

Gig purred from within Adelaide's clothing, expressing an eagerness for that proposition.

"And then what?" Adelaide demanded, cautiously.

"Then," Albert answered, "I take Gig."

"Like Hell you will."

"It's simple, Adelaide. I need something to present to the Smiths. If I don't, they'll kill me; they'll kill you -- it will all be very messy."

"Give them some other guinea pig."

Albert groaned. "They'll run tests; they'll want to see a demonstration. I can't just give them any old guinea pig. I need Gig."

"I still think we should just shoot him," said Jeremy.

"I agree," said Joe, pulling his pistol from its holster, and levelling it at Albert before Peter burst in, and Constable Henderson swung around, firing at that man instead.

The constable made a 'lucky shot'; Peter fell to the floor.

"Joe!" Adelaide gasped.

"He killed Mick Hervey; he killed Madeline Greensborough. I got word that Walter got killed too -- I'm pretty sure Peter did that one, since Albert was already gone."

"He's right," Peter murmured. "I did."

Julia went to him, and cradled his head in her arms. "What did you have to go and do all that for?" she whispered to her husband, as he lay there, dying.

"Well, hey there, 'Gene Girl'," he mumbled, looking up into her eyes and smiling. "Long time no see."

She giggled, and tears began to stream down her cheeks. "Things didn't work out the way I wanted, 'Rock Star'. But then, they rarely do." She kissed him, then, on the forehead. "Peter, you pathetic fool," she lamented.

"I'm pathetic for you," he grinned, weakly. "Make sure Adelaide's safe, will you? And don't trust that Albert Johnson guy; he's a snake."

"I'm glad it was Joe who shot me. He's a good man, Joe. You can rely on him."

"Thanks, Peter," said Joe.

"Don't mention it," Peter grunted, barely intelligible. "This didn't work out the way I planned either."

Julia rocked him in her arms, gently. "Rest now," she said. "Find some peace, my wonderful husband."

"Okay," he agreed. "I love you," he whispered, as he lapsed into unconsciousness, and his agony was finally relieved.

"I love you too, Peter."

He had literally run from where Jasper had left him, at the end of that snowy mountain road. Peter's visit with the Witch of the Mountains had been brief, and his rest there short. He did not stop to investigate the events at Howard's cabin -- his intuition drove him forward like a compass, on a collision course with a very brusque encounter with his destiny.

"Do you still want to shoot me, Joe?" asked Albert, of the man who had earlier displayed his intent to kill the assassin.

"No."

"Smart man. Well, then, at least Peter didn't die for nothing."

"You're a bastard," noted Jeremy, for the second time.

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard it all before. 'Sticks and stones may break my bones --'"

"That's enough!" Adelaide screeched. "That was my Dad!" She went to sit on the floor, beside her two parents, while her father passed away.

The young woman huddled up close against her mother. "Why does this have to happen?" she sobbed. "Why did any of this have to happen?"

"It's just life, my baby girl," Julia replied, softly. "It's not very fair."

"Don't make me give up Gig," Adelaide pleaded. "I've lost so much already."

"I wish you didn't have to," her mother admitted, "I really do. But you need to, and you know why."

"If it helps," said Albert, "I'll guarantee his safety."

"And how will you do that?" Adelaide sniffed.

"I can't tell you," the assassin replied. "You'll just have to trust me."

"Trust you'," Jeremy mocked Albert. "Yeah, right."

"Ask Gig; he knows," Annie advised Adelaide, from within her imagination. With the absence of any better alternative, Adelaide agreed. She removed Gig from where he lay, nestled within her garments, and held him, wrapped in the woollen socks, close to her nose.

She stared deeply into his eyes.

Adelaide saw the future, then -- or, perhaps, only she imagined it to be so, but it provided her with some reassurance, and permitted her to do what she was incapable of doing before. She kissed Gig, on the nose, on the cheek and between his ears, and then handed her precious parcel to her mother, for the scientist to do with as she saw fit.

"Hi Gig," she said. "I have someone you might like to meet."

Gig did indeed find his introduction to Molly, the brown, shaggy Abyssinian guinea pig, to be quite engaging, indeed. Whilst the two became intimately acquainted, further details regarding subsequent events were negotiated.

"You all have to leave," said Albert.

"What? Here?" Joe questioned him. "This cabin? The mountains? Where?"

"North America," the assassin clarified.

"I didn't sign up for that," Joe retorted. "I'm going home to Suffield; if you don't like that, that's tough."

Albert turned to Julia. "They know too much. If they don't leave, the deal is off."

"I won't say anything," Joe promised. "Neither will Jeremy. Will you, Jeremy?"

Julia smiled. "I have a feeling that Jeremy will want to come with us. Isn't that right, Jeremy?"

The young man refused to answer either of them.

"Where are we going, Mom?" Adelaide asked.

"It's a surprise," her mother said.

Mister Ajax, flanked by two armed guards, descended, in the elevator within which they collectively resided, far too slowly for the assassin's liking. He only wanted to finally be done with this entire wretched affair, and, while praying for the enduring comfort that Peter Pemberton had earlier discovered, then slink off into some quiet, dark corner, gratefully succumbing to his accursed brain tumour.

Unfortunately, for him, that was just not how it was going to be.

"Greetings, Mister Ajax," welcomed one of the Smiths. "We have been most pleased to hear of recent developments, and of your success. Our scientists sent word earlier that they have indeed confirmed the authenticity of the guinea pig subject in your possession. This is wonderful news."

"I'm happy you're satisfied," said Mister Ajax, disingenuously. "Are you all here?" he asked, casually, but with a faint hint of enthusiasm.

"Of course," came the jovial reply, from the other side of the veil. "We wouldn't miss this for anything." The Smith seemed quite anxious. "You do have it with you, don't you? The guinea pig?"

Mister Ajax removed the creature in question from his inside coat pocket, and held it up for the Smith's rudimentary inspection. "This is the subject, yes."

"Hand the creature to one of the guards." Ajax obeyed. "Guard," the Smith consequently ordered, "bring the guinea pig to me, through the veil."

The man did so, and one then-strongly disadvantaged guard was left to subsequently fall victim to Mister Ajax's carefully premeditated blows.

After all, Albert Johnson had made a promise, and this one he intended to keep.

Great risk had been ventured by engaging in such bold action, but, in a paltry few seconds, the assassin was armed, had shot the other guard in the back, moved through the veil, and relieved that man of both the guinea pig and his weapon -- and all before his first victim's body had struck the floor.

His well-thought 'gamble' had 'paid off'.

Clutching at Mister Ajax's neck, Gig held on for dear life whilst the assassin then accomplished what he had set out to do, and dispatched the entire complement of Smiths to whatever, hopefully appropriate, afterlife awaited them. It was very noisy, and the guinea pig's poor little ears reverberated from the thunder of the pistol-fire, rendering the creature virtually deaf, permanently.

When it was all over, Mister Ajax removed the quivering, wheeking guinea pig from his shoulder, and stroked it, lovingly, until it was calm. "Let's go home, Gig," he said, then, but the cavy could not hear him, and would need to learn the decency of his intentions through the man's further actions -- which he soon would.

They left the subterranean cavern, and carried on their way, simply a man, Andrew Jackson, and his guinea pig, Gig, to peacefully live out what remained of their lives.

Mister Ajax and Albert Johnson both stayed behind.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE:

CHRISTMAS DAYS.

AN ELECTRIC LIGHT TWINKLED AGAINST A REFLECTIVE RED BOBBLE, HANGING FROM THE BRANCH OF AN ARTIFICIAL, PLASTIC TREE.

Adelaide Pemberton lay on the floor beneath it, looking up through the branches from below, appreciating the spectacle of colour and aesthetic ornamentation observed from that vantage point. It gave her some solace -- this was a commodity of which she had, of late, little supply.

"It's time to eat," said Jeremy, towering above her. "We're having cold turkey and salad. That's a first, for me, anyway." It was a warm summer's afternoon, and the carpeted cement floor had provided a perfectly cool place upon which to relax.

"Give me a minute, okay?" Adelaide begged. "I'm just thinking."

Indeed, there was much to reflect on. Gig was gone, but there was now Molly; the brown Abyssinian grew larger every day. Adelaide had made the wry observation that she was starting to look like a pear-shaped buffalo, a cow-like animal that had previously inhabited the North American plains.

Compared to Molly, Gig had been absolutely silent.

Joe had ultimately relented, and he and Jeremy accompanied Julia, Adelaide and Molly west, to Vancouver, where they had boarded a giant airship that transported them ten thousand miles in less than a day. Albert Johnson had gone east, to 'take care of business', as he had so succinctly put it -- nothing further would be heard from him, or Gig.

Albert had placed one further condition upon his cooperation, however. Albert Johnson would send word to his former wife, Michelle, and she, along with their daughter, Aleisha, and an elderly guinea pig named Hamlet would meet up with the troupe at the airport in Vancouver.

Precisely why they would pay any heed to the advice of a man such as Albert Johnson, Adelaide was unable to comprehend -- but they did. Somehow, he had been able to maintain their trust for so many years.

Adelaide herself had quickly come to trust her own mother once again, and implicitly, also to her amazement. Only a short time ago, she would have felt convinced that she would be incapable of anything but hate towards Julia, but she had learned, quite poignantly, that the bond of family is extremely resilient.

They would arrive in Melbourne, Australia, to be greeted by no one, anonymous and of little note. The Dennison family name must have had some influence with a government official or two, since they admitted both Molly and Hamlet without quarantine -- no documentation on the subject has survived to explain this irregularity.

It had been a bright Saturday morning, and the hot-air balloons drifted high over the city, while the bells of streetcars chimed in the distance. Adelaide was enamoured by the many differences, but comforted by the similarities to the country she had left -- occasionally, she would forget about Gig, and then sternly chastise herself for it.

"Damn, it's hot," piped Joe loudly, from the other room. "It's just not right, to be so hot and sunny on Christmas Day."

"It is a bit strange, I admit," said Julia, "but you'll get used to it."

Jeremy dissented. "I don't think I'll ever get my head straight, here," he said. "It's too bizarre. The stars are all different."

Adelaide silently agreed with Jeremy; these were some of the longest days of the year in the southern hemisphere, and to come from some of the darkest in the northern hemisphere was simply too great a contrast for the more primal parts of her mind to absorb. It was if a dream, a fantasy -- difficult to comprehend as reality.

For the second time, she had lost those she held dear, been uprooted from her home, taken to a dramatically different place to begin a revised existence -- and told to forget.

She would never forget.

Meanwhile, Andrew Jackson and Gig, the guinea pig, were celebrating Christmas from inside the cabin, at the logging camp, where they had returned after the Smith massacre some time earlier. Once events had been indirectly explained to one rather apprehensive man named Jasper, in Jasper, arrangements were made to transport, by whirligig, several large crates of supplies and equipment to the location that would comprise the former assassin's new home.

The wind and snow raged outside while Gig chewed upon carrots, and nibbled on celery; Andrew would eat his meal from several aluminium cans. They huddled up beside the pot-bellied stove together, new friends who would spend the next two years in harmonious companionship.

On Christmas Day, but not the same Christmas Day, Andrew Jackson pressed the barrel of a shotgun against the bottom of his own chin.

It was all over, or would soon be so -- Gig had expired, and their mutual grave had been dug. Andrew was presently standing in it.

This had taken a great deal of mental effort on Andrew's part, for precious little remained of his mind, having been eaten away by the tumour that lived so vicariously within it. He knew enough to know that Gig had surrendered to old age, and that there was no longer any need to persist himself, and so he had excavated a portion of Gig's summertime carrot patch -- in the frozen soil, this had taken some effort.

Although it was bitterly cold, there was no storm, and the sun shone brightly above, warming his face. It seemed fitting, somehow -- bittersweet.

He was happy; he had reconciled his demons, and the little guinea pig had granted him clemency for his sins. His family was safe from the turmoil that had collapsed modern society -- a computer and a satellite communications device had permitted Andrew to keep pace with events in America and Canada, at least until the orbiting relay transmitted no further.

Andrew pulled the trigger.

Of course, none of this had happened yet.

“Adelaide? Your supper’s getting -- um -- warm.” Jeremy towered over her once again.

“Come on,” Julia ordered, from the other room. “Eat!”

“Yes, Mom,” Adelaide grudgingly replied. She sighed, and clambered to her feet, to stand in front of, and facing, Jeremy.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” she reciprocated.

They kissed, then. If Peter saw that event, it is certain he was pleased.

“What are you two up to in there?” Joe hollered. “It’s time for eating, not whatever it is you’re doing.”

Adelaide snickered, and Jeremy smiled, like the guinea pig that ate the entire lettuce patch in a single afternoon.

I’m sure there’s a contemporary analogy, but I don’t know what it is.

They sat at the dining room table, eating their Christmas afternoon supper, engaged in that silent rapport which only lovers have between them. Love did not only blossom amongst the youth, but between Joe and Julia as well -- eventually.

Molly would continue to grow, and then give birth, to four pups, one of whom was a calico of white, black and brown with an adorable pink nose -- he would become Gig the Second.

There is nothing more to say. The rest, as you well know, is history.

The End.

EPILOGUE:

THE INQUISITION.

IT WAS TIME TO LEAVE.

Judith left her small cottage, nestled amongst the gum trees, with a sod roof populated with numerous guinea pigs, and departed to meet with the Committee for Academic Oversight.

“Greetings, Doctor Burnley,” called John Green cheerily from his belt-driven bicycle. “Good luck to you. I hope Bernard is less than his typical grumpy self today.”

“Thank you, John,” she replied. “I pray so, as well.”

Up the narrow, windy path she walked, toward the village, nestled in the Macedon Ranges a hundred kilometres outside the old city of Melbourne, long since abandoned. A cow grazed lazily by the side of the track; she paused for a minute to stroke its immense bulk, and then carried on.

Mid-morning, the village was quite busy, bustling with traders dealing from rickety gum-tree stalls, and their various patrons. Ancient brick buildings built over five hundred years earlier, although showing obvious signs of decay, still stood the test of time.

It is to one of these that Judith would make her haste, being behind her time, to face the committee that would decide the fate of her work regarding Adelaide Pemberton, and the guinea pig, Gig.

“Doctor Burnley,” Bernard declared from his chair, stationed at the middle of a row of five, all occupied. “It is an honour that you were able to find enough time spare in order to grace us with your presence.”

“My apologies,” Judith offered, sincerely. “It has certainly been an interesting morning, but I will spare you those details.” Indeed, it had, for one of her guinea pigs, a sow named Molly, had earlier given birth beneath her bed.

The labour had been difficult, but both mother and pups were presently doing well, nestled amongst Judith's bed linens. It would not do to simply leave the poor creatures upon the cold, earthen floor, after all.

"To keep you from us, it must have been," he nodded, unconvincingly. "No matter. Shall we begin?" His question rhetorical, he awaited no responses before commencing.

"Doctor Burnley is petitioning for approval to publish her manuscript entitled 'A Contemporary Interpretation of the Events Surrounding the Introduction of Genetically-Modified Guinea Pigs to the Australian Continent.'"

"Or 'Gig'," she interjected. "You can simply refer to the document as 'Gig'."

"That will spare us a great deal of exertion," Bernard agreed. "Fine, then. Dear Missus Matthews, what say you on 'Gig'?"

Missus Matthews, sitting on the chair two to Bernard's right, was evidently quite enthusiastic. "It's wonderful," she bubbled. "Positively enthralling."

Bernard was not as keen. "Could you please be a bit more specific?"

"Well," Missus Matthews sighed, endeavouring to contain her zeal, "I found it all to be extremely believable. Although it may be a bold statement to say that the people of that time were not that different from ourselves, I think it is something that needed to be said."

A frown graced Bernard's glaring visage. "Indeed."

"Don't be that way, Bernard."

"Missus Matthews," he growled, "I would respectfully request that, in these chambers, you grant these proceedings with the reverence that they deserve."

"As you wish, Mister Hotham."

"Chairman Hotham," he corrected. Missus Matthews would not concede that point.

"In any event, Mister Hotham, Doctor Burnley's work deserves our approval. Science is not merely about facts; it is also, and in great part, the subject of theories. I find none of Doctor Burnley's ideas to be outside the realm of reason."

"You will be the death of me, Missus Matthews."

"That might just be, Mister Hotham," she replied, dryly.

Bernard moved to retort; however, Judith interjected. "Thank you, Missus Matthews."

Missus Matthews smiled.

"Yes," Bernard spoke, dismissively, "the Chairman gives you thanks for your contribution. Now, let us hear from Mister Ashburton."

The man occupying the chair directly to Bernard's right was not to be as accommodating as Missus Matthews. "I have to say," he began, "that I have some trouble with this whole notion of applying modern behaviour to such emotionally primitive examples of humanity as those contemporary to the time before the Fall."

Bernard looked positively delighted.

Mister Ashburton carried on. "You might as well give such courtesies to Neanderthals, or even African apes."

"Perhaps we should," Judith snapped. "It is nothing but sheer arrogance to persist in the belief that humans are the only beings on the entire planet capable of rational thought."

"That attitude," Mister Ashburton sniffed, "will make you no friends on this committee."

Judith glowered, but heeded his warning, and did not proceed further.

"Humans before the Fall were, although quite prolific in their constructions and populations, quite barbaric creatures; to dispute this established truth is foolishness. In fact, your own work has them killing each other arbitrarily, and without remorse -- does it not?"

"The numbers of such individuals were few, comprising only a very small percentage of a very large populace," Judith argued. "They were most certainly not all capable of such ruthless action."

"But yet, you yourself show that Peter Pemberton was, and rather easily so, perverted into nothing more than a cold-blooded killer."

"I would not say that Peter's transition was by any means 'easy'."

"Nevertheless, for that scenario to transpire, the potential for such behaviour must have existed within him before he began his progression to depravity."

"You truly believe that, in humanity, that potential no longer exists?"

"Doctor Burnley!" Bernard roared. "You will not make such outrageously heretical statements in front of this committee!"

"Need I remind you that our convictions, including that we are separate, and not subject to the instinctual whims that led our primal ancestors to behave in the fashion they did prior to the Fall, are crucial to our peaceful existence in this New Enlightenment."

Judith was unrepentant. "Perhaps it is time for that particular belief to bear some measure of investigation."

"Investigation?" Bernard sputtered, flustered. "Investigation? Now, see here, Madam --"

Missus Matthews interrupted him, lest he launch into a tirade that could persist for hours. "Thank you, Mister Ashburton."

"Yes," said Bernard, hurriedly composing himself. "Thank you, Mister Ashburton. Missus Eltham," he calmly turned to the woman seated directly to his left, "do you have anything to contribute to these discussions?"

"Indeed, I do," she said. "First, I must commend you, Doctor Burnley, for your efforts in attempting to bring clarity to the origins of our wondrous guinea pigs."

"I found it quite enjoyable to read of Adelaide's exploits, and your conjecture regarding the mechanisms that led to the events chronicled was deeply interesting."

"However, I have to raise an objection to the idea that Albert Johnson, or Andrew Jackson, could have ever found any sort of redemption. He was a reprehensible character, unworthy of whichever brand of forgiveness.

"What led you to draw such a repugnant conclusion?"

"Thank you for your contribution, Missus Eltham," Judith said. "My answer to your query is simple: We all deserve the opportunity for redemption."

"But, Doctor Burnley, Albert Johnson was a man before the Fall. By definition, he was not capable of empathy or kindness; however, you have him, seemingly spontaneously, commit acts of kindness uncharacteristic of his species.

"As such, 'Gig' is not credible."

"Without drawing Mister Hotham's ire, let me simply state that our moral evolution needed a point from which to begin -- who is to say that it was not there?"

With that answer, Missus Eltham appeared to be satisfied. "Well said, Doctor Burnley."

"Thank you, Missus Eltham," said Bernard, obviously disgruntled by Judith's prudent response. However, one last, shining hope for his principles remained -- Mister Sydenham.

Mister Sydenham was perhaps the staunchest conservative that had ever graced the New Enlightenment. He sat on every committee, and imbued his conventional viewpoint into all aspects of modern life. It was almost, nay expressly guaranteed that his tremendous oratorical skills would sway the committee toward his traditionalist philosophies, and Judith Burnley's precious 'Gig' was doomed.

Encouraged by this blissful expectation, Bernard eagerly directed the man to speak. "Mister Sydenham."

Regarding that man's imminent sermon, Judith was not terribly optimistic. She braced herself for an onslaught of conventionalism.

"Well done, Doctor Burnley," he said, simply.

Needless to say, Bernard was consequently rather furious. "Well done? WELL DONE? What on Earth do you mean, 'well done'?"

"Mister Hotham," Mister Sydenham implored, "would you please exercise some modicum of restraint?"

The chairman took a deep breath, and then paused whilst his hackles receded. "Kind sir," Bernard pleaded, subsequently, "could you please clarify your position to this committee? You, of all people, should see the folly of Doctor Burnley's methods. Can you not see the dark abyss that this heresy thrusts us toward?"

"I knew you were completely incapable of objectivity, Bernard," Judith spat, angrily. "You should resign your place. Scientist indeed; why, if you --"

"Mister Hotham," Mister Sydenham replied, ignoring Judith's inappropriate rant, "I have come to believe that, without a change in common thought, our descent into that 'abyss' is inevitable; in that matter, no assistance from Doctor Burnley is necessary."

"How is that, then?"

"We have been far too comforted by our belief that we are incapable of irrational violence, are unable to make illogical deductions. Peter Pemberton, I am certain, would have felt similar as a young man -- this is, to me, a disturbing concept."

"He was a savage. He was living a lie."

"That is your opinion; he had his, and I have mine. I also find Albert Johnson's proposed 'redemption' to be, at the very least, a possibility, fracturing the walls of my steadfastness regarding our 'ingrained' morality."

"Although it is true that in the Fall, and the chaos that reigned in the Darkness that followed, the truly wicked were completely destroyed, the question still needs to be considered of whether or not these vile creatures were inherently so, or if their evil was instead borne of tragic circumstance."

"To survive, we need to discover an accurate hypothesis. If we still retain within us the capacity to suddenly turn to violence, to light that flame of rage, and burn the fields of our compassion with

unchecked fury, then we must mount appropriate countermeasures against the threat posed by ourselves.”

All were silent.

Eventually, Bernard would speak -- but timidly. “You came to this conclusion through reading ‘Gig’?”

“That, and observation. Our modern society has become, in many ways, one as much of privilege as the world before the Fall. This parallel cannot be easily ignored. Meanwhile, Doctor Burnley’s work exhibits the similarities between the two far too convincingly to be cast aside, and discarded as alarmism.

“It enlightened me, but also troubles me -- greatly.”

“Enough that you would have such heresy widely read? That you would give people fear of themselves?”

“Yes, Bernard,” said Mister Sydenham, “I would. We cannot risk otherwise. The populace must know that they need be wary of what lies within, so that they do not inadvertently destroy what we have all worked so hard to rebuild.”

Defeated, the chairman slumped in his chair, resigned to the fate he knew in his heart would soon arrive. “What say the rest?” he inquired of the committee, their answer already resounding inside his frustrated mind.

“Aye,” they said, fulfilling his prophecy.

“Aye,” said Bernard, weakly, surrendering to the whims of the mob. “I might as well make it a unanimous decision.

“‘Gig’ will be published; may there be enough mercy in this world for all of us.”

POSTSCRIPT:

HOPE AND WARNING.

WE OWE A GREAT DEAL TO OUR PREVIOUS CAST OF PLAYERS.

Were it not for their efforts regarding the parts that they played in the events described, we might have had a very different, and certainly tragic history.

Alarmingly, it has been noted that the youth of modern times seemingly fail to appreciate the contribution of the guinea pigs, instead considering them a mere oddity, a curiosity of little worth. This is a true shame, for were it not for the example the creatures provided to the humanity that remained after the Fall, we might have remained eternally in chaos.

They were a reminder of human ingenuity that could not be ignored, a torch that lit the dark night that existed for many years where humanity's only desired accomplishment was to survive -- and, at the same time, a demonstration of transgression into places where we dare not tread again.

For although the guinea pigs exist to exhibit to us an example of the astonishing wonders of which we are capable, they also pointedly tell us that there are roads we should not travel, and that our empathy for our fellow man transcends any desire for technological advancement.

This is something the youth of today desperately need to understand; the current movements to abandon our ethics in favour of scientific enlightenment can do no good, and must be reconsidered lest we suffer a Fall of our own.

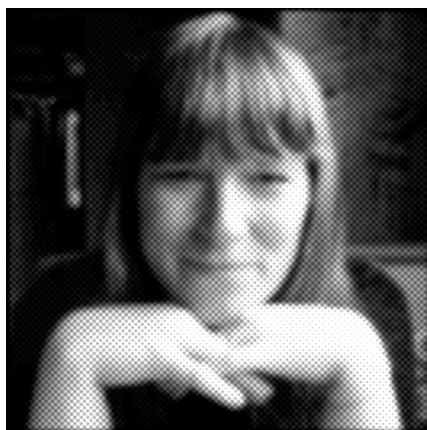
Perhaps Doctor Burnley is right in her assessment that we are not so different after all.

This document is hereby approved for publication by the Committee for Academic Oversight; Bernard Gotham, Chairman.

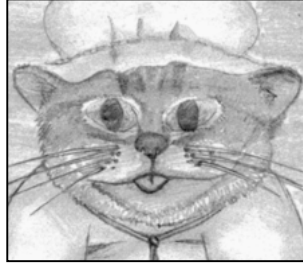
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BORN ON JANUARY 14TH, 1975 in Alberta Canada, Melody Christina Ayres-Griffiths briefly studied music before she was stricken with numerous chronic immune-related conditions.

In 2006 she met the love of her life April, an Australian, on-line; briefly, Melody went to meet her and, after evaluating their futures on either continent, the couple elected to settle in Melbourne.



When not writing, Ms. Ayres-Griffiths occupies her time practicing jazz piano, and tending to her guinea pigs, Gig, Molly and Priscilla.



When Caroline Hawthorn, the famous Victorian romance novelist, frustrated by writer's block spontaneously types tales she rapidly suspects are the fantasies of her blue-eyed ginger-tabby, Fatticus, these conclude with nonsensical sentences that soon draw the undesired attention of clandestine forces.

Written as if by Caroline herself, **FATTICUS FACES THE WOLF** details the events that follow when, after the stories are published in a children's literary periodical, an unsavoury character draws the widowed author and her cat into a web of conspiracy and intrigue.

An account of love, war, betrayal and loss, Fatticus and Caroline will discover that their world is far greater than they could have ever imagined, and that sometimes what is missing can be found once more.

You may never look at a ginger-tabby in quite the same way again.

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